Summer 2013

Evaluating ITPR-dependence of Apoptotic Signaling from the Endoplasmic Reticulum

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Stress within the endoplasmic reticulum (ER) can be induced by misfolded proteins accumulating in the lumen of this organelle. Signaling of ER stress to other parts of the cell acts in altered gene expression, physiological adaptation, and with sustained stress, apoptosis (cell suicide). ER stress is often studied with highly toxic compounds that create severe ER stress rapidly, and a condition that is likely not physiologically relevant within an organism. In this study, we examine the apoptotic signaling induced by moderate ER stress, and in particular the inositol 1,4,5-trisphosphate receptor (ITPR). The ITPR regulates Ca2+ release from the ER lumen, and can induce apoptosis. We hypothesize that moderate levels of ER stress activate apoptosis via an ITPR-dependent signal. To induce moderate ER stress, we expose cells to 20-30mM concentrations of tunicamycin, an inhibitor of N-linked glycosylation in the ER. In this study, inclusion of an ITPR inhibitor (2-aminoxyethoxynaphthyridine, 2APB) protected cells from moderate ER stress, but did not protect cells from severe ER stress. A second methodology of assessing ITPR regulation of apoptosis includes overexpression of an ER localized form of Bcl-2. The B cell lymphoma 2 protein (Bcl-2) has the ability to block the activation of cell suicide (apoptosis) by binding and inhibiting pro-apoptotic proteins (Bax family members). Bcl-2 is a membrane localized protein, found primarily in the mitochondrial outer membrane, and the endoplasmic reticulum (ER) membrane. In recent studies, ER localized Bcl-2 has been shown to interact with the ITPR and inhibit pro-apoptotic Ca2+ signaling from the ER. We transfected cells with plasmids bearing a Bcl-2 fusion protein to assess the capability of ER-Bcl-2 to protect cells from moderate apoptosis. The results of initial experiments did not show protection to either moderate or severe ER stress though some replicates of the experiment seemed to indicate protection. As this result is inconsistent with other results in our lab, we propose additional replicates of the experiment and using a drug-based mimic of this interaction to assess moderate ER stress signaling (Akl et al., 2013).

### Introduction

Apoptosis is the key mechanism by which unwanted or damaged cells are eliminated within an organism. The major players in apoptosis are the endoplasmic reticulum (ER), and the mitochondria, along with native proteins playing a part. The ER, the site of protein synthesis, folding, and glycosylation plays a major role in the initiation of apoptosis. As the ER becomes stressed and is unable to fold proteins, it activates what is known as the Unfolded Protein Response (UPR), where ER signaling activates pathways that signal for adaptation or activation of apoptosis (Akl et al., 2013). In intrinsic apoptosis, executioner signals of the Bcl-2 family of proteins within the mitochondria are activated. Bax in particular, homodimerizes in the mitochondrial outer membrane and causes for the permeabilization of the mitochondria and the release of cytochrome C (CytC) into the cytosol (Chan, 2004). CytC is a molecule that activates caspase proteases and apoposomes assembly to begin the process of programmed cell death (Rodriguez, 2010). The pro and anti-apoptotic members of this family of proteins contain different Bcl-2 homology (BH) domains. Pro-apoptotic members contain BH1-3 domains, and a subgroup of pro-apoptotic members contain BH3 only domain. The anti-apoptotic members contain at least four, BH1-4 domains (Rodriguez, 2013).

The inositol 1,4,5-trisphosphate (ITPR) receptor is a receptor that binds to the ITPR ligand in the ER. This receptor acts as a channel by which calcium is released from the ER stores into the cytosol and signal of apoptosis in the mitochondria. It has been shown that Bcl-2 suppresses ITPR receptor activity through its BH4 domain, thus inhibiting calcium release from the ER to the mitochondria (Akl et al., 2013).

Previous studies performed in our lab have shown that there is a difference in the cell response to low and high concentrations of stress when during the inhibition of the IP receptor with 2-Aminoxyethoxynaphthyridine (2-APB). Using 2-APB on temperature sensitive BNT7 (tsBNT7) Hamster fibroblasts, it has been shown that cell viability was increased by decreasing apoptotic percentages at low levels of ER stress. The focus of this study was to examine whether there is a difference between moderate and severe levels of ER stress. Using ER localized Bcl-2 fused with green fluorescent protein (Bcl-2[ER]-GFP), wild-type (WT) Bcl-2-GFP, and green fluorescent protein (GFP), BHK2 cells were transfected to assess whether there would be a difference in apoptotic nuclei at low and high levels of ER stress. Considering that the Bcl-2 binds to the ITPR to inhibit calcium release into the cytosol, and thus arresting apoptosis at low level of ER stress, we proposed that there will be a difference in apoptotic nuclei between low and high levels of ER stress.

### Results

**Figure 1: A working model apoptotic signaling induced by moderate ER stress.** Moderate ER stress activates mitochondrial apoptotic signals via the ITPR-mediated release of Ca2+ from the ER lumen. In recent studies, 2APB has been shown to be sufficient to inhibit apoptosis in cells exposed to moderate ER stress.

**Figure 2: Expression of Bcl-2 and GFP in BHK-21 36 hours after transfection**

A) BHK21 cells were transfected using the plasmid constructs depicted.
B) After 36 hours, cytosol lysates were obtained. 3) GFP transfected lysates show expression of GFP at the 30 kDa marker (GFP is 27 kDa), expression of ER-Bcl-2-GFP at the 55 kDa marker (Bcl-2 being 28 kDa; GFP 27 kDa) and wt-Bcl-2-GFP at the 45 kDa marker. There were no proteins present for the non-transfected BHK21 lysates. 2) Only native Bcl-2 seems to have been tagged by the antibody, appearing at approximately the 26 kDa marker. Immunoblot 3 shows the tubulin control.

C) After transfection and 36 hour exposure to low and high levels of ER stress, cells were fixed using 4% paraformaldehyde (PFA) and nuclei were DAPI stained.

**Figure 2:**

- **A:** GFP and Bcl-2 expression in BHK-21 cells.
- **B:** Expression of GFP and Bcl-2 in BHK-21 cells after 36 hours.
- **C:** Expression of GFP and Bcl-2 in BHK-21 cells after 36 hours.

**Figure 3:**

- **A:** Overexpression of Bcl-2(ER) protects in temperature-shifted tsBN7 cells from apoptosis.
- **B:** BHK21 cells were transfected with ER-Bcl-2-GFP and exposed to low and high levels of ER stress. The results show the mean ± SEM for three independent experiments. A significant effect of temperature on the expression of Bcl-2(ER) was observed.

**Results**

- **BHK21 Apoptosis**
  - 2APB significantly reduced the number of apoptotic cells.

**Conclusions**

- Cells transfected with the ER-Bcl-2-GFP plasmid were significantly reduced from undergoing apoptosis caused by temperature shifts, which would otherwise elevate levels of ER stress.
- BHK21 cells exposed to moderate ER stress induced by tunicamycin (30mM) were significantly reduced by 2APB, but not ER-Bcl-2-GFP.
- Rescue of BHK21 cells transfected with ER-Bcl-2-GFP and exposed to low and high levels of ER stress, was not significant when compared to the control.
- There was a trend in apoptotic percentages in some of the experiments performed with ER-Bcl-2 transfected BHK21 cells but was not replicated, may be due to variability of future studies.

### Literature Cited


