A Useful Approach to Identify Novel Small-Molecule Inhibitors of Wnt-Dependent Transcription

Kenneth Ewan1, Bożena Pajak1, Mark Stubbs2, Helen Todd3, Olivier Barbeau2, Camilo Quevedo5, Hannah Botfield1, Rodrigo Young4, Ruth Ruddle5, Lee Samuel1, Alysia Batterby1, Florence Raynaud2, Nicholas Allen1, Stephen Wilson4, Branko Latinkic1, Paul Workman2, Edward McDonald2, Julian Blagg2, Wynne Aherne6, and Trevor Dale1

Abstract

The Wnt signaling pathway is frequently deregulated in cancer due to mutations in genes encoding APC, β-catenin, and axin. To identify small-molecule inhibitors of Wnt signaling as potential therapeutics, a diverse chemical library was screened using a transcription factor reporter cell line in which the activity of the pathway was induced at the level of Disheveled protein. A series of deconvolution studies was used to focus on three compound series that selectively killed cancer cell lines with constitutive Wnt signaling. Activities of the compounds included the ability to induce degradation of β-catenin that had been stabilized by a glycogen synthase kinase-3 (GSK-3) inhibitor. This screen illustrates a practical approach to identify small-molecule inhibitors of Wnt signaling that can seed the development of agents suitable to treat patients with Wnt-dependent tumors. Cancer Res; 70(14); 5963–73. ©2010 AACR.

Introduction

The Wnt signaling pathway is activated by Wnt ligands at multiple stages of metazoan development and controls the differentiation and/or proliferation of stem cells in multiple tissues. The “canonical” Wnt/β-catenin pathway is activated following Wnt ligand binding to a complex comprising Frizzled (Fz) and LRP5/6 receptors and ultimately activates β-catenin/transcription factor–dependent transcription (Fig. 1A). Key steps in the pathway include the formation of a ligand-activated receptor complex, the inhibition of intracellular β-catenin turnover, and the formation of a nuclear β-catenin/transcription factor (TCF) transcription complex. Wnt/β-catenin signaling activates (and represses) transcription of genes whose promoters contain binding sites for TCF–β-catenin that had been stabilized by a glycogen synthase kinase-3 (GSK-3) inhibitor. This screen illustrates a practical approach to identify small-molecule inhibitors of Wnt signaling that can seed the development of agents suitable to treat patients with Wnt-dependent tumors. Cancer Res; 70(14); 5963–73. ©2010 AACR.

Authors’ Affiliations: 1School of Bioscience, Cardiff University, Cardiff, United Kingdom; 2Cancer Research UK Centre for Cancer Therapeutics, The Institute of Cancer Research, Sutton, Surrey, United Kingdom; Virology Department, Moredun Research Institute, Penicuik, Scotland, United Kingdom; and 4Department of Cell and Developmental Biology, University College London, London, United Kingdom

Note: Supplementary data for this article are available at Cancer Research Online (http://cancerres.aacrjournals.org/).

Corresponding Author: Trevor Dale, University of Cardiff, Biomedical Sciences Building, Museum Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3AX, United Kingdom. Phone: 44-29-2087-4652; Fax: 44-29-2087-4116; E-mail: DaleTC@cardiff.ac.uk.

doi: 10.1158/0008-5472.CAN-10-1028

©2010 American Association for Cancer Research.
drug discovery efforts. To overcome this problem, we used a cell-based assay to screen a diverse library of small molecules for regulators of TCF-dependent transcription. We identified a number of chemical regulators that functioned at distinct levels within the Wnt signaling cascade.

Materials and Methods

Materials

The Cancer Research UK Centre for Cancer Therapeutics compound library was used for the primary screen. CCT031374 analogues were either obtained from this library or from commercial sources. Preparation of compounds to follow-up the initial hit matter is described in Supplementary Material. ΔN-LRP, ΔN-β-catenin, VP16-TCF4, Tau-1N4R, c-myc-luciferase, and survivin-luciferase vectors were kind gifts of K. Brennan (University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom), P. Polakis (Genentech, South San Francisco, CA), A. García de Herreros (IMIM-Hospital del Mar, Barcelona, Spain), S. Lovestone (King’s College London, London, United Kingdom), B. Vogelstein (Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center, Baltimore, MD), and R. Moon (University of Washington School of Medicine, Seattle, WA), respectively. Human tumor cell lines were obtained from American Type Culture Collection, grown for less than 20 passages, and tested regularly for Mycoplasma infection (Lonza Mycoalert).

Reporter cell line

A fragment of the Xnr3 enhancer (−180 to −60), four TCF consensus-binding sites, and a c-Fos minimal promoter were inserted into the pUB-bsd blasticidin resistance plasmid (Invitrogen). The luciferase gene and the IRES-GFP-SV40 poly(A) sequences from pIRES-hrGFP-2a (Stratagene) were inserted downstream of the promoter (Fig. 1B). The reporter vector was transfected into a stable HA-Dvl2-ER (estrogen receptor)–expressing HEK293 cell line (11). Blasticidin-resistant cells were treated with 9 mmol/L lithium chloride (LiCl) for 16 hours to induce Wnt-dependent expression of green fluorescent protein (GFP). Two rounds of fluorescence-activated cell sorting (FACS) were used to enrich for high-GFP-expressing cell clones. The 7df3 clone was used as the reporter line in the primary screen.
Primary screen
Structurally diverse, low molecular weight compounds (63,040) were added individually to reporter cells at 20 μmol/L 2 hours before addition of 10 μmol/L β-estradiol in 384-well plates. Luciferase assays were carried out 24 hours after β-estradiol addition using SteadyGlo reagent (Promega). Activities of primary hits were reconfirmed in further luciferase assays and counterscreened for inhibition of luciferase enzyme (EasyLite kinase reagent, Perkin-Elmer) and nonspecific cell growth inhibition (Celltiter Blue, Promega).

Secondary assays
Hit compounds (20 μmol/L) were assayed in transiently transfected HEK293 cells cotransfected with Topflash (Wnt reporter, Upstate), TK-renilla (control), and cyto-megavirus-driven HA-Δv12-ER expression plasmids. Twenty-four hours after transfection, cells were stimulated with 3 μmol/L β-estradiol or treated with the glycosyn synthase kinase-3 (GSK-3) inhibitor 6-bromoindirubin-3′-oxime (BIO; Calbiochem). Luciferase activity was measured after 24 hours using DualGlo reagent (Promega). For deconvolution assays, HEK293 cells were cotransfected with Topflash and CMV-lacZ reporter (control) plasmids together with constitutively active core components of the pathway: ΔN-erbB-2, Axin-GID, ΔN-β-catenin, and VP16-TCF4. Compounds were added 24 hours after transfection, and reporter activity was analyzed a further 24 hours later using BrightGlo and BetaGlo (Promega). Luciferase activity was normalized to β-galactosidase reporter activity. Experiments with c-myc and survivin-luciferase reporter activities with the Wnt pathway were performed on top of the β-catenin reporter, Upstate), TK-renilla (control), and cytomegalovirus-driven HA-Dvl2-ER expression plasmids. Twenty-four hours after transfection, cells were stimulated with 3 μmol/L Wnt-3a conditioned medium (12), or 50 μmol/L β-estradiol addition using SteadyGlo reagent (Promega). For pulse-chase analyses, L-cells were treated throughout with 7.5 μmol/L BIO, 9 mmol/L LiCl, 50% Wnt-3a conditioned medium (12), or 50 μmol/L MG-132 (Merck Biosciences), and with compound for 6 hours before medium replacement as indicated. β-Catenin was assayed as previously described (13). The following antibodies were used: β-catenin and GSK-3β (BD Transduction laboratories) and β-actin (Sigma). The β-catenin antibody from BD Transduction Laboratories was used for immunocytochemistry as previously described (14).

β-Catenin stability experiments
Mouse L-cells were cultured in DMEM/10% fetal bovine serum and exposed to 7.5 μmol/L BIO, 9 mmol/L LiCl, 50% Wnt-3a conditioned medium (12), or 50 μmol/L MG-132 (Merck Biosciences), and with compound for 6 hours before medium replacement as indicated. β-Catenin was assayed as previously described (13). The following antibodies were used: β-catenin and GSK-3β (BD Transduction laboratories) and β-actin (Sigma). The β-catenin antibody from BD Transduction Laboratories was used for immunocytochemistry as previously described (14).

For pulse-chase analyses, L-cells were treated throughout with 7.5 μmol/L BIO. Cells were first starved in medium lacking methionine and cysteine for 1 hour then labeled for 1 hour with 5 MBq per 25 cm² flask of 35S-labeled methionine/cysteine. Cells were chased with unlabeled medium for the indicated periods. Cells were lysed, and immunoprecipitation was carried out using 2 μg/sample monoclonal β-catenin antibody and 50 μL of Protein G–coated beads (GE Healthcare). After three washes in lysis buffer, bound proteins were eluted in SDS sample buffer, separated by electrophoresis, and analyzed as previously described (15).

Phosphorylated Tau experiment
HEK293 cells were transfected with GSK-3β and/or Tau-IN4R expression vectors (16). After 48 hours, cells were exposed to 5 μmol/L BIO for 8 hours, after which they were treated with 20 μmol/L CCT031374 and 5 μmol/L BIO for the indicated time periods. Immunoblotting for GSK-3β and phospho- and nonphospho-Tau antibodies (BT2, AT270, Autogen Bioclear) was carried out as previously described (16). Band peak areas were calculated using ImageJ (Scion). The phospho-Tau peak areas were normalized to the total Tau levels.

Glutathione S-transferase–E-cadherin pull down of β-catenin
The β-catenin binding region of E-cadherin (amino acids 730–882) was fused in frame with the glutathione S-transferase (GST) coding region of pGEX-5X-2 (GE Healthcare). GST–E-cadherin fusion protein was expressed and purified using Glutathione Sepharose 4 Fast Flow beads (GE Healthcare). Ten-centimeter dishes of HEK293 and SW480 cells were treated with CCT031374 and/or BIO and lysed to give a final volume of 1 mL cell extract. Five micrograms of GST–E-cadherin were combined with 300 μL of cell extract and precipitated following addition of glutathione beads. Bound β-catenin was detected by immunoblotting.

Embryonic stem cell quantitative PCR for LEF1
H9 human embryonic stem cells were cultured on feeders using standard culture methods (17). Using a modification of ref. (17), neurogenic embryoid bodies were generated by culturing H9 colony fragments in suspension in neutralizing medium (ADF, Invitrogen 12634010) containing 10 μmol/L SB431542 (TGF-β Inhibitor, Tocris) and 10 μmol/L Y-27632 (ROCK inhibitor, Calbiochem) for the first 48 hours. On day 8, medium was supplemented with BIO (5 μmol/L) and/or CCT031374 (20 μmol/L) for 24 hours. RNA was extracted with Rneasy (Qiagen). cDNA was synthesized with Superscript II Rnase H-RT (Invitrogen). Quantitative PCR reactions were done in DyNAmoHS master mix (New England Biolabs) using the LEF1 primers 5′-accagattcttgagcaagg-3′ and 5′-cagacaggcttgataaag-3′.

Xenopus studies
Xenopus laevis embryos were obtained, deegelated, and cultured using standard procedures (18), and staged according to Nieuwkoop and Faber (NF; ref. 19). Test compound or DMSO (control) was added at the 4- to 16-cell stage. Embryos were scored at NF stages 35 to 38. For the animal cap assay, dissected Xenopus embryo animal caps were treated with 300 mmol/L LiCl for 10 minutes followed by 2.5 hours...
exposure to CCT036477 at the indicated concentrations or with DMSO control (indicated with dash). RNA extraction and reverse transcriptase-PCR conditions were carried out as described (20).

**Zebrafish studies**

Zebrafish embryos were collected after natural spawning. Embryos were treated from the 16-cell stage until midgastrulation (8 hours postfertilization) with 20 μmol/L of compound CCT036477 in 1% DMSO/fish water or with DMSO equivalent. Control and experimental embryos were imaged when at the postgastrulation somitic stage (48 hours postfertilization).

**Results**

**Optimization and outcome of high-throughput screen**

To identify novel small-molecule regulators of the Wnt signaling pathway, a HEK293-based reporter cell line (7dBG) was generated to allow the inducible induction of TCF-dependent transcription. The rationale for this approach was twofold. First, inducible induction of the Wnt pathway was predicted to minimize positive and negative feedback from transcriptional targets, thereby simplifying the process of target deconvolution. Second, the cell line did not require Wnt signaling for proliferation, thereby allowing the rapid distinction of nonspecific growth inhibitors and compounds acting specifically on the Wnt pathway.

A bicistronic reporter coding for firefly luciferase and GFP under the control of a promoter containing four canonical TCF binding sites and the Wnt-responsive region from the *Xenopus Xnr3* promoter (ref. 21; Fig. 1B) was introduced into HEK293 cells that already contained an integrated Disheveled–estrogen receptor fusion (Dvl2-ER; ref. 11). Previous studies showed that estradiol induction of Dvl2 activity raised β-catenin levels within 30 minutes in these cells (11). Clones that showed tight regulation of TCF-dependent transcription in response to estradiol and the GSK-3 inhibitor LiCl (Fig. 1C) were identified by FACS sorting.

Assays in a 384-well format showed reproducible 14-fold and 10,389-fold induction with estradiol and LiCl, respectively, with low coefficients of variation (%CV) and high and 10,389-fold induction with estradiol and LiCl, respectively. Control and experimental clones were imaged when at the postgastrulation somitic stage (48 hours postfertilization).

**Hit triage and mechanistic deconvolution assays**

To identify molecules that specifically blocked TCF-dependent transcription, compounds with a greater than 5:1 ratio of activity against a TCF-luciferase versus a TK-renilla luciferase reporter were selected following cotransfection with a Dvl-2-ER expression plasmid in HEK293 cells. Thirty-seven compounds showed a greater than 5:1 specificity ratio together with low toxicity and high TCF activity, as originally detected in the 7dBG reporter line (Fig. 2A). All 37 hits showed activity against TCF-dependent transcription that was induced by treatment of HEK293 cells with the GSK-3 inhibitor BIO (22).

To identify the point in the canonical Wnt signaling pathway at which the compounds acted, the pathway was activated at distinct levels by expression of activating cDNAs (see Fig. 1A). At the receptor level, TCF-dependent transcription was induced by expression of a dominantly active NH2-terminal deletion of the LR6 coreceptor, ΔN-LRP6 (23). Activation at the Disheveled level involved expression of Dvl-2. At the GSK-3 level, transcription was activated by expression of the GSK-3-binding domain of Axin (Axin-GID), which acts to titrate GSK-3 from the endogenous Axin protein (24). A nondegradable, β-catenin with an NH2-terminal deletion (ΔN-β-catenin; ref. 25) activated transcription downstream of the β-catenin turnover complex, and a TCF4-VP16 fusion protein was used to probe compound activity at the level of the nuclear transcription factor. All 37 compounds blocked activation by Axin-GID: 9 of these failed to block ΔN-β-catenin or TCF4-VP16 (i.e., they act at the level of Axin), a further 8 blocked ΔN-β-catenin but failed to block TCF4-VP16 (i.e., they act at the level of β-catenin), whereas 20 compounds blocked all three activators (Fig. 2A). Results from a subset of the deconvolution assays are shown for three compounds (Fig. 2B and C).

**Hit selection**

Selective antiproliferative activity for human tumor cell lines with Wnt pathway–activating oncogenic β-catenin, APC, or AXIN deletions (HT29 (26), SW480 (27), HCT116 (28), and SNU475 (29)), compared with a nontransformed epithelial cell line, was used as a criterion in combination with chemical tractability to focus on a subset of nine and subsequently three compounds for further analysis (Table 1; Fig. 2B; Supplementary Fig. S1). The set of three compounds (CCT070535, CCT036477, and CCT031374; see Fig. 2B) was selected based on a combination of the following criteria: metabolic stability (compound stability in mouse liver microsomes; Supplementary Fig. S2), low growth-inhibitory activity in nontumor control cells, promoter specificity (TCF versus TK), and the availability of commercially available analogues. A key feature in this selection was the clarity of the deconvolution response to different Wnt pathway activators because unambiguous activity suggested that the mechanism of compound action could be tracked in subsequent assays (Fig. 2C). All three compounds blocked HCT116 human colon cancer cell proliferation by inducing apoptosis as shown by caspase-3 activity assays (Supplementary Fig. S3), but CCT031374 induced almost twice as much caspase activity than the other compounds.

**Alteration of β-catenin stability**

To assess whether the compounds altered β-catenin levels or localization, mouse L-cells were treated with each
compound together with the GSK-3 inhibitor, BIO, to block β-catenin degradation. Following 8 hours of incubation, control BIO-treated cells showed a strong increase in total β-catenin levels that was associated with raised nuclear and cytosolic pools as determined by immunocytochemistry (Fig. 3A and B). Of the top nine compounds, only CCT031374 prevented BIO-induced accumulation of β-catenin (Fig. 3A). The blockade of β-catenin accumulation by CCT031374 was accompanied by a reduction in both nuclear and cytosolic β-catenin pools (Fig. 3B; Supplementary Figs. S4 and S5). In U2OS GFP–β-catenin human osteosarcoma cells (Bioimage, Thermo-Fisher), addition of CCT031374 induced formation of GFP–β-catenin aggregates (Supplementary Fig. S4B) possibly due to sequestration by subcellular organelles, a phenotype.

Figure 2. Hit triage and deconvolution. A, compound attrition flow diagram leading to selected hits. B, structures of the three hit compounds, CCT031374, CCT036477, and CCT070535. C, summary of the effects of 30 μmol/L CCT031374, CCT036477, and CCT070535 on TCF-dependent transcription induced at different levels of the Wnt pathway. Control Gal4-luciferase reporter activity was induced by VP16-Gal4.
that was occasionally observed with endogenous β-catenin in mouse L-cells (Supplementary Fig. S4C). By contrast, CCT036477 did not alter β-catenin levels but blocked transcription at the β-catenin level, although not by blocking the interaction of β-catenin with the histone acetyltransferases CBP or p300 (Supplementary Fig. S6). Compound CCT070535, which blocked TCF-dependent transcription at the TCF level, did not alter BIO-induced levels of β-catenin, but increased the levels of nuclear β-catenin (Supplementary Fig. S4C).

**Exploratory studies with CCT031374 series compounds**

The IC₅₀ for CCT031374 activity in blocking BIO-induced β-catenin stabilization in L-cells was similar to that determined in the TCF-reporter cell line and transient assays (Fig. 3B; Supplementary Fig. S3A), suggesting that the compound may interfere with TCF-dependent transcription by blocking the function of β-catenin. The activity of several CCT031374 analogues showed both TCF-reporter and β-catenin reporter activity (IC₅₀) and growth inhibition (GI₅₀) of hit compounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>Reporter IC₅₀ (µmol/L)</th>
<th>HT29 (APC mutant) GI₅₀ (µmol/L)</th>
<th>HCT116 (oncogenic β-catenin) GI₅₀ (µmol/L)</th>
<th>SW480 (APC mutant) GI₅₀ (µmol/L)</th>
<th>SNU475 (Axin mutant) GI₅₀ (µmol/L)</th>
<th>CCD841Co (control) GI₅₀ (µmol/L)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCT007812</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCT014939</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>&gt;100</td>
<td>&gt;100</td>
<td>&gt;100</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCT020435</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCT028492</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCT031374</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCT036098</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>&gt;100</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCT036477</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCT038407</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCT070535</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>44*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** HT29 (26), SW480 (27), and HCT116 (28) are colon carcinoma cell lines. SNU475 is a hepatocellular carcinoma cell line (29). CCD841Co is a colonic epithelial cell line whose use as a control has been described previously (5).

Abbreviation: ND, not done.

*No growth inhibition at the highest concentration tested (indicated).
strong, immediate response to compound action (Fig. 4B). Consistent with the Tau phosphorylation data, CCT031374 did not inhibit recombinant GSK-3 in a kinase assay (Supplementary Fig. S10). In addition, CCT031374 had no activity in biochemical assays for PP1, PP2A, and tyrosine phosphatase enzyme activity (Supplementary Fig. S11).

As CCT031374 blocked the growth of a number of cancer cell lines, including SW480 colon cancer cells (Table 1), it was anticipated that the compound would reduce free β-catenin levels within these cells. Surprisingly, a pull-down assay with GST–E-cadherin to detect free β-catenin levels found that these were not altered by CCT031374 (Fig. 4C). By contrast, CCT031374 blocked free β-catenin levels in BIO-stimulated HEK293 cells (Fig. 4C). Despite the lack of effect on β-catenin levels, CCT031374 reduced TCF-dependent transcription in SW480 cells (Fig. 4D). Similarly, CCT031374 did not alter levels of free β-catenin resulting from overexpression of ΔN–β-catenin or Axin-GID in HEK293 cells (Supplementary

Figure 3. Prevention of β-catenin stabilization by CCT031374. A, β-catenin abundance in Western blots of lysates from mouse L-cells treated for 6 h with 7.5 μmol/L BIO and 20 μmol/L of the indicated hit compounds. B, decreased abundance of β-catenin in immunostained mouse L-cells and in Western blots of lysates from mouse L-cells treated with indicated concentrations of CCT031374 and 7.5 μmol/L BIO for 8 h. Decreases of relative β-catenin/β-actin ratios in the Western blot were normalized to BIO (100%) and control (0%). Bar, 30 μm. C, structures of analogues of CCT031374. CCT031374 is compound 1. EN300-05350 (compound 11) is a structurally unrelated control of similar lipophilicity, pKa, and H-bonding. D, IC50 values from reporter cell assays and Western blots of lysates from mouse L-cell using CCT031374 and its analogues. *, no effect at the maximum concentration used; +, compound 8 was toxic to mouse L-cells at this concentration (30 μmol/L); §, assay not done.
but decreased TCF-dependent transcription (Fig. 2C). Taken together, these data show that reductions in β-catenin levels are not required for CCT031374-mediated inhibition of TCF-dependent transcription.

**Compound activity against known Wnt targets**

The activities of CCT031374, CCT036477, and CCT070535 were tested against expression of known Wnt target genes using myc and survivin-luciferase reporter readouts (Fig. 5A). Each compound showed activity against both promoters, but responses were greatest against the c-myc promoter. CCT031374 also showed activity against endogenous LEF1 mRNA levels in human neurogenic embryoid bodies (hNEB) in which Wnt signaling had been induced by the GSK-3 inhibitor, BIO (Fig. 5B). CCT036477 was toxic to the hNEBs whereas CCT070535 showed a weak, nonsignificant response. Expression of Axin2, another Wnt target gene (31), was not significantly induced by BIO in the hNEBs (data not shown).

**In vivo activity of hit compounds**

To obtain an integrated view of compound activity in multiple developmental stages, compounds were added to the medium of Xenopus and zebrafish embryos during development. In these assays, CCT036477 showed the strongest phenotypic effects on both Xenopus and zebrafish development. When added to Xenopus laevis embryos at the 4- to 16-cell stage, CCT036477 ventralized embryos and interfered with primary axis formation (Fig. 5C), as has previously been shown for inhibitors of Wnt signaling (1). Consistent with this observation, CCT036477 reduced expression of two well-characterized Wnt target genes (Siamois and Xnr3) in animal cap assays (Fig. 5B). CCT036477 addition to zebrafish
embryos at the 16-cell stage also induced axis defects, leading to phenotypes (Fig. 5D) that have been associated with alterations to Wnt signaling (32).

**Discussion**

In the current study, we showed that a highly sensitive Wnt reporter cell line can be used to identify small-molecule inhibitors of Wnt signaling. The cell-based screen described here was similar to previous studies by Emami and colleagues, Huang and colleagues, and Chen and colleagues in that it relied on the identification of compounds that blocked the activity of an integrated TCF-luciferase reporter. However, the present study used a reporter cell line that had an inactive basal TCF-reporter that could be induced through the activation of a Dsh–estrogen receptor fusion protein following addition of estrogen. The advantage of this strategy is that Wnt signaling can be transiently induced and that the cell response to inhibition of the pathway is less likely to be dependent on complex positive and negative

![Figure 5. Effect of compounds on Wnt target gene expression and development.](image)

A, HEK293 cells were transfected with C2-Myc-luc or Survivin-luc promoter-reporter constructs together with Axin-GID inducer and exposed to 40 μmol/L compound for 24 h. Reporter activity was normalized to expression from a cotransfected CMV-lacZ reporter. B, CCT031374, at 20 μmol/L, repressed BIO-induced LEF1 expression in human neurogenic embryoid bodies exposed to 3 μmol/L BIO and CCT031374 for 24 h. The relative abundance of LEF1 was normalized to ACTB. CCT036477 decreased Siamois and Xnr3 expression in Xenopus animal cap assays. Animal caps were treated with 0.3 mol/L LiCl for 10 min, then incubated in medium with or without CCT036477 for 3 h. RNA from NF stage 10.5 embryos provided a second positive control. C, CCT036477 inhibited the development of Xenopus anterior head structures such as the eye (indicated with an arrow) and the cement gland. Embryos were exposed to DMSO or 75 μmol/L CCT036477 from the 4- to 16-cell stage to NF stage 38. D, CCT036477 induced head and tail patterning defects (indicated with arrows) in zebrafish embryos. Zebrafish embryos were exposed to 1% DMSO or 20 μmol/L CCT036477 from fertilization until midgastrulation. A range of mild to severe head patterning and tail patterning phenotypes were seen.
feedback pathways commonly found in cancer cell lines (33–35). Furthermore, cell lines whose growth is dependent on the Wnt pathway have been shown to undergo apoptosis (as seen for CCT031374, CCT036477, and CCT070535; Supplementary Fig. S3) following Wnt pathway inhibition, and this can be difficult to distinguish from nonspecific cell killing during high-throughput screening.

Multiple compounds were identified in the primary screen that showed specificity for the TCF-reporter when compared with control promoters. A hit triage/deconvolution cascade was designed to identify the most promising candidates among these compounds for further study. These assays included growth-inhibitory activity against tumor cell lines with activated Wnt signaling. However, a key criterion was the "clarity" of the deconvolution response such that reproducible, mechanistically consistent readouts were identified, which allowed the logical pursuit of the mechanism of action of the compound to distinct points in the Wnt pathway. From a total of 63,040 compounds, 9 compounds that operated at either the β-catenin or TCF levels of the pathway were selected for further investigation. Downstream assays focused on 2 compounds that operated at the β-catenin level and 1 that operated at the TCF level.

CCT031374 acted at the β-catenin level based on the observation that it blocked TCF-dependent transcription induced by a stabilized form of β-catenin (NH2-terminal deletion of 89 amino acids; ref. 36), but not by a constitutively active TCF-VP16 fusion protein. Consistent with this mechanism, CCT031374 increased the degradation of endogenous wild-type β-catenin in mouse L-cells that had been stabilized by the GSK-3 inhibitor BIO. CCT031374 did not increase β-catenin NH2-terminal phosphorylation in the presence of BIO-treated cells (data not shown), suggesting that a pathway independent of phospho-β-catenin binding to β-TRCP induced increased degradation. A number of alternative β-catenin degradation routes have been described. These include pathways involving APC and the Siah1 ubiquitin ligase (37, 38), the presenilin/PKA complex (39), and the protease calpain (40). CCT031374 failed to induce β-catenin degradation products characteristic of calpain-induced proteolysis (ref. 40; data not shown), suggesting that distinct novel pathways are involved in its mechanism of action.

Surprisingly, the block of TCF-dependent transcription in SW480 colon cancer cells by CCT031374 was not accompanied by a corresponding reduction in β-catenin protein levels (Fig. 4F). Moreover, levels of transfected stabilized β-catenin (∆N–89–β-catenin) were not reduced in HEK293 cells treated with CCT031374 (Supplementary Fig. S12), although the compound blocked TCF-dependent transcription in these cells (Fig. 2B). Taken together, these data argue that the degradation of β-catenin may not be necessary for the blocking effect of CCT031374 on TCF-dependent transcription in all cellular contexts, suggesting that CCT031374 operates through more than one mechanism. A similar correlation between β-catenin stability and TCF-dependent transcription was observed in studies of the prolyl oligopeptidase Pin-1. Pin-1 activity correlated with both β-catenin stability and TCF-dependent transcription in HeLa cells by modulating its interaction with APC (41). By contrast, in PTEN-deficient LNCaP cells, Pin-1 altered TCF-dependent transcription without altering β-catenin levels by blocking β-catenin interactions with the androgen receptor (42). CCT031374 may similarly function through molecular pathways that can be coupled to protein degradation in selected contexts.

Of the three compound series studied, only CCT036477 showed clear activity in vivo where it blocked development of zebrafish and Xenopus embryos and expression of Wnt target genes. CCT031374 and CCT070535 did not show clear responses in these systems, and it is currently unclear whether the compounds reached the required concentration to block signaling in these in vivo models or whether their lack of in vivo activity reflects a specificity for cells with oncogenically activated Wnt signaling. Overall, these studies have identified novel small molecules that target distinct levels of Wnt signal transduction pathway. Further studies with these compounds (see Supplementary Fig. S13) could lead to the identification of molecular targets of therapeutic benefit in multiple tumor types with activated Wnt signaling, and further investigations will be published in due course.

Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest

T. Dale: commercial research grant, Merck Serono. Authors affiliated to the Cancer Research UK Centre for Cancer Therapeutics are employees of the Institute of Cancer Research, which has a commercial interest in inhibitors of the Wnt pathway and has a funded research collaboration with Merck Serono, from which authors may benefit from remuneration. The other authors disclosed no potential conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgments

We thank Teresa Brooks and Paul Rogers for help with reporter cell line optimization, Perithan Jalbant for help with the GFP-β-catenin assay, and Bethan Lloyd-Lewis for assistance with the intensity quantitation of immunocytochemistry images.

Grant Support

Work at Cardiff University and The Cancer Research UK Centre for Cancer Therapeutics was supported by CR-UK grant nos. C368/A5410 and C368/A7505, and C368/A2187, C368/A8274, and C368/A8365, respectively. National Health Service funding supported work at the National Institute for Health Research Biomedical Research Centre, The Institute of Cancer Research, and The Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust. P. Workman is a CR-UK Life Fellow.

Received 03/25/2010; revised 05/17/2010; accepted 05/18/2010; published OnlineFirst 07/06/2010.

References

5. Emami KH, Nguyen C, Ma H, et al. A small molecule inhibitor of

Cancer Res; 70(14) July 15, 2010
A Useful Approach to Identify Novel Small-Molecule Inhibitors of Wnt-Dependent Transcription

Kenneth Ewan, Bozena Pajak, Mark Stubbs, et al.

Cancer Res 2010;70:5963-5973. Published OnlineFirst July 7, 2010.

Updated version
Access the most recent version of this article at:
doi:10.1158/0008-5472.CAN-10-1028

Supplementary Material
Access the most recent supplemental material at:
http://cancerres.aacrjournals.org/content/suppl/2010/07/02/0008-5472.CAN-10-1028.DC1

Cited articles
This article cites 40 articles, 20 of which you can access for free at:
http://cancerres.aacrjournals.org/content/70/14/5963.full#ref-list-1

Citing articles
This article has been cited by 9 HighWire-hosted articles. Access the articles at:
http://cancerres.aacrjournals.org/content/70/14/5963.full#related-urls

E-mail alerts
Sign up to receive free email-alerts related to this article or journal.

E-mail alerts
Reprints and Subscriptions
To order reprints of this article or to subscribe to the journal, contact the AACR Publications Department at pubs@aacr.org.

Permissions
To request permission to re-use all or part of this article, use this link
http://cancerres.aacrjournals.org/content/70/14/5963.
Click on "Request Permissions" which will take you to the Copyright Clearance Center's (CCC) Rightslink site.