Therapeutics, Targets, and Chemical Biology

Differentiation of NUT Midline Carcinoma by Epigenomic Reprogramming

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Abstract

NUT midline carcinoma (NMC) is a lethal pediatric tumor defined by the presence of BRD-NUT fusion proteins that arrest differentiation. Here we explore the mechanisms underlying the ability of BRD4-NUT to prevent squamous differentiation. In both gain-of and loss-of-expression assays, we find that expression of BRD4-NUT is associated with globally decreased histone acetylation and transcriptional repression. Bulk chromatin acetylation can be restored by treatment of NMC cells with histone deacetylase inhibitors (HDACi), engaging a program of squamous differentiation and arrested growth in vitro that closely mimics the effects of siRNA-mediated attenuation of BRD4-NUT expression. The potential therapeutic utility of HDACi differentiation therapy was established in three different NMC xenograft models, where it produced significant growth inhibition and a survival benefit. Based on these results and translational studies performed with patient-derived primary tumor cells, a child with NMC was treated with the FDA-approved HDAC inhibitor, vorinostat. An objective response was obtained after five weeks of therapy, as determined by positron emission tomography. These findings provide preclinical support for trials of HDACi in patients with NMC. Cancer Res; 71(7); 1–11. ©2011 AACR.

Introduction

Mechanistic study of cancer-associated translocations has led to the development of effective therapies that target fusion oncoproteins, particularly constitutively active tyrosine kinases (1–3). In contrast, although successes such as targeting of PML-RARα fusion proteins with all-trans retinoic acid and arsenic trioxide have been described (4–6), discovery of ligands that directly target fusion oncoproteins that function as transcriptional cofactors has proven to be challenging.

Because of this difficulty, there is great interest in targeting the enzymatic components of higher-order gene regulatory complexes, such as histone deacetylases (HDACs; ref. 7), but clinical application of this approach has been limited. Examples include the use of DNA methyltransferase inhibitors (DNMTi) in myelodysplastic syndrome (MDS; ref. 8) and HDAC inhibitors in cutaneous T-cell lymphoma (CTCL; ref. 9).

NUT midline carcinoma (NMC) is a distinctive, aggressive human cancer defined by rearrangements of the gene NUT (10). These poorly differentiated carcinomas usually arise in midline structures of the nasopharynx or mediastinum. Although rare, NMCs occur throughout life and are often mistaken for other entities, including thymic carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma of the head and neck, lung carcinoma, Ewing sarcoma, and acute leukemia. Advanced local disease is frequently accompanied by distant hematogenous metastases. Commonly used therapies include surgical debulking, consolidative radiotherapy, and cytotoxic chemotherapy, but even with multimodality therapy the median survival from diagnosis is only 9.5 months.

In the majority of NMCs, most of the coding sequence of NUT on chromosome 15q14 is fused in-frame to the 5′ portions of BRD4 or BRD3, creating chimeric genes that encode BRD-NUT fusion proteins (11, 12). The fusion proteins retain BRD-encoded bromodomains, which bind acetylated histones and recruit chromatin-remodeling complexes (13). BRD facilitates transcriptional elongation and is associated with mitotic chromosomes, a property that may act to...
preserve epigenetic marks in daughter cells (14–16). NUT encodes an unstructured polypeptide of unknown function that is highly expressed in normal spermatids (11). A major oncogenic effect of the BRD4-NUT fusion protein appears to lie in its ability to arrest the differentiation of NMC cells (12). Based on the recently reported observation (17) that NUT directly binds to the histone acetyltransferase (HAT) p300, it was hypothesized that BRD4-NUT sequesters HAT activity. Here, we present data consistent with this model in which BRD-NUT fusion proteins act by inducing global histone hypoacetylation and transcriptional repression, effects that can be reversed by HDAC inhibitors, which show promise as targeted therapeutic agents for NMC.

Materials and Methods

**Mammalian cells**

The NMC cell lines TC797 (18), PER-403 (19), 00–143 (20), TY82 (21), and 10326 (12), and the non-NMC squamous cell carcinoma cell lines, HTB-43 (pharyngeal squamous cell carcinoma; ref. 22) and HCC-95 (lung squamous cell carcinoma; ref. 23), have been described. Patient tumor tissue was minced, digested with collagenase, and cultured in WIT medium optimized for carcinoma cells as described (24). 293T and U2OS cells were obtained from the American Type Culture Collection. A derivative of 293Ts, 293Trex, which contains a tetracycline-inducible isogenic derivative, have been described. Patient tumor tissue was minced, digested with collagenase, and cultured in WIT medium optimized for carcinoma cells as described (24). 293T and U2OS cells were obtained from the American Type Culture Collection. A derivative of 293Ts, 293Trex, which contains a tetracycline-inducible isogenic derivative, have been described. Patient tumor tissue was minced, digested with collagenase, and cultured in WIT medium optimized for carcinoma cells as described (24). 293T and U2OS cells were obtained from the American Type Culture Collection. A derivative of 293Ts, 293Trex, which contains a tetracycline-inducible isogenic derivative, have been described.

**Expression plasmids**

cDNAs encoding proteins of interest were assembled in the vectors pcDNA5 FRT/TO (Invitrogen) and confirmed by DNA sequencing.

**Histology and immunohistochemistry**

Formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded cell blocks of cultured cells were prepared as described (12, 26) using Histogel (Richard-Allan Scientific). Sections were stained with hematoxylin and eosin or by immunohistochemistry (IHC), which was performed on 5 μm sections prepared from formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded primary tumors, or cell blocks. Immunohistochemical stains performed using anti-NUT rabbit polyclonal antibody (27), anti-NUT rabbit monoclonal antibody (26), Ki-67 (MIB-1 clone; DAKO USA; ref. 12), and PanKeratin (ref. 12; clone MNF116, DAKO USA) were as described.

**Fluorescence in situ hybridization**

Dual-color fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH) assays for BRD4 and NUT breakpoints were performed on formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded, 4 μm tissue sections as described (20). Probes used for the detected NUT breakpoint, flanking a 181kb region containing NUT, included the 3′ telomeric BAC clones 1H8 and 6403, and the 5′ centromeric clones 412e10 and 3d4. Probes used for the 19p13.1 BRD4 breakpoint were the 5′ centromeric BAC clone 187i3 and the 3′ telomeric BAC clone 87m17.

**High content screening**

NMC cells were plated at a concentration of 1,000 cells per well in black, clear-bottom, 384-well microtiter plates. Small-molecule HDAC inhibitors were transferred from library plates arrayed in a dose–response format using robotic pin transfer. Following compound incubation for 48 or 72 hours, cells were fixed with paraformaldehyde (3.8%) and stained with Hoechst, anti-acetyl-lysine (Cell Signaling Technologies), or anti-cytokeratin (clone AE1/AE3, DAKO USA). Secondary antibodies included rhodamine donkey anti-rabbit IgG (1:100, Jackson Immuno Labs) and FITC pig anti-rabbit IgG (1:100, DAKO USA). Three-color fluorescence images were acquired using automated epifluorescence microscopy (ImageXpress-MICRO; Molecular Devices) and analyzed using MetaXpress (Molecular Devices), GraphPad Prizm, and Spotfire Decision-Site software.

**Small interfering RNA and transient transfection**

The design, synthesis, and electroporation of siRNA duplexes specific for human NUT were as described (12). Scrambled siRNA (Silencer Negative Control #1 siRNA Template, Applied Biosystems/Ambion, Austin) was used as a negative control.

**Immunoblotting**

Proteins in cell extracts prepared with high-salt RIPA buffer (50 mmol/L Tris, pH 8.0, containing 1% NP-40, 0.5% sodium deoxycholate, 0.1% SDS, 250 mmol/L NaCl, and 5 mmol/L EDTA) were separated by SDS-PAGE, electrophotographically transferred to Immobilon membranes (Millipore), and stained with anti-NUT polyclonal antibody, or anti-FLAG (Sigma-Aldrich). Acid extraction of histones was performed as per instructions (Millipore). Acid extracts were electrophoretically separated, blotted as above, and stained with anti-acetyl...
In vivo studies

Xenograft tumors were generated from 2 established NMC cell lines (TC-797 and PER-403) and from 1 low-passage primary tumor (8645). Cells were transduced with a lentivirus encoding firefly luciferase, mCherry, and puromycin phospho-transferase (31), followed by selection in 2 μg/mL of puromycin. A total of 10^5 cells in 100 μL of 30% Matrigel/70% PBS were injected subcutaneously into the flanks of 6-week-old female NCr nude mice (Charles River Labs). Mice were serially imaged after injection of 75 mg/kg α-luciferin using an IVIS Spectrum instrument (Caliper Life Sciences). Tumor volumes were calculated from caliper measurements using the formula \( V = \frac{1}{2} \times \text{length} \times \text{width}^2 \). Established xenograft tumors were defined as tumors with increasing bioluminescence and measurable tumor volume. Cohorts of mice with established tumors were divided into groups with statistically equivalent tumor burden, and treated daily with vehicle or 10 mg/kg of LBH589 by intraperitoneal injection. Tumor burden was determined by serial bioluminescence imaging and tumor volume measurements. For survival studies, mice were sacrificed when tumors reached 2 cm in the largest diameter. Statistical significance was determined by 2-tailed Student's \( t \) test. Samples for histopathological analysis were fixed in 10% buffered formalin. All animal studies were performed under IACUC approved protocols.

Chromatin immunoprecipitation quantitative polymerase change reaction (ChIP-qPCR)

ChIP was performed using the SimpleChIP Enzymatic Chromatin IP Kit from Cell Signaling Technologies. For each IP, approximately 1.5 × 10^7 cells were crosslinked with 1% formaldehyde for 10 minutes at 37°C and processed as per manufacturer instructions. Total H3 was immunoprecipitated with 10 μL of H3 antibody provided in the SimpleChIP Kit, and acetylated histone H3K18 was immunoprecipitated with 10 μL of ab1191 from Abcam. Negative control ChIP was performed using rabbit IgG (Jackson Immunoresearch. qPCR was performed as described earlier using primers designed to amplify promoter-proximal regions of the target genes. For each PCR reaction, 2 μL of ChIP DNA was used. The ratio of H3K18Ac to total H3 was calculated for each promoter and used to determine relative changes in H3 acetylation upon Trichostatin A (25 nmol/L) treatment.

Expression of BRD4-NUT is associated with a global decrease in histone acetylation and overall repression of gene expression

Recent findings indicating that NUT binds to, and activates the HAT activity of p300 (17), prompted us to determine the
effects of BRD4-NUT on bulk chromatin acetylation. We found that expression of BRD4-NUT in 293T cells markedly diminished H3K18, H4, and H4K8 acetylation, histone marks associated with gene expression. Conversely, siRNA-mediated knockdown of BRD4-NUT in NMC cell lines increased, to a more variable degree, acetylation of these same residues within 24 hr (Fig. 1A). Changes in chromatin marks induced by BRD4-NUT knockdown preceded morphologic changes indicative of squamous differentiation (Fig. 1B), which is marked by increases in nuclear size, open chromatin, and cytoplasmic volume. In line with the observed increases in activating histone marks, transcriptional profiling 24 hours after siRNA knockdown of BRD-NUT, before morphologic changes indicative of squamous differentiation, revealed that among 369 genes that changed expression significantly in the NMC line Per-403, a disproportionate fraction (87%) was up-regulated, consistent with a repressive effect on gene transcription. Similarly, 68% of genes that changed expression following the knockdown of BRD4-NUT in the NMC line TC-797 were up-regulated.

**Restoration of acetylation using histone deacetylase inhibitors induces a program of squamous differentiation of NMC cells, phenocopying siRNA-induced silencing of BRD4-NUT**

Based on these data, we postulated that global repression of acetylation and transcription by BRD4-NUT may prevent the expression of genes required for differentiation. If this idea is correct, it follows that restoration of histone acetylation with HDACi should induce NMC cell differentiation. To test this idea, we treated NMC cells with the tool HDACi compound, trichostatin A (TSA). Indeed, we found that TSA caused global increases in histone acetylation (Fig. 2A), growth arrest (Fig. 2B), and squamous differentiation marked by flattening...
of cells, accumulation of abundant, keratin-positive, eosinophilic cytoplasm, nuclear enlargement, and decreased nuclear staining consistent with an increase in euchromatin (Fig. 2C), all features that are also induced by BRD4-NUT knockdown. The induction of differentiation and arrested growth by TSA was unique to NMC cells, as non-NMC squamous cell carcinoma cell lines were unresponsive to treatment (Fig. 2B and C). Even a higher concentration of TSA (100 nmol/L) that was lethal to the NMCs caused no changes in differentiation or growth of the non-NMCs (Supplementary Fig. S1). Comparative analysis of 7 selected genes associated with squamous differentiation revealed that all 7 changed in expression similarly following BRD4-NUT knockdown and TSA treatment in TC-797 NMC cells as measured by quantitative reverse transcriptase polymerase chain reaction (qRT-PCR; Fig. 3A). The mechanism by which HDACi increased expression of
these genes appears to be due to promoter acetylation, as quantitative chromatin immunoprecipitation-PCR (ChIP-qPCR) with α-acetyl H3K18 antibody revealed enrichment of 5 of the squamous differentiation associated gene promoters in TSA-treated NMC chromatin extracts (Fig. 3B).

To gain a broader view of the effects of siRNA and TSA on gene expression, we performed GSEA using microarray data from NMC cell lines treated with BRD4-NUT siRNA, or TSA. GSEA revealed that genes that increased in expression following BRD4-NUT knockdown were highly enriched among those that increased following TSA treatment (Fig. 3C). Gene set enrichment analysis (GSEA) measuring the correlation of genes up-regulated following knockdown of BRD4-NUT in both TC-797 and PER-403 NMC cells with HDACi-mediated expression changes. In these plots, vertical lines indicate the rank order of the knockdown gene set genes within the HDACi-treated cells (left, TC-797; right, PER-403). Red (left), genes up-regulated by TSA treatment; blue (right), down-regulated genes. The concentration of vertical lines within the TSA (red) portion of the spectrum reflected in the running enrichment score plot (green line) indicates the degree of correlation between upregulation in response to BRD4-NUT knockdown or TSA treatment.

**HDACi abrogate the growth of NMC cells in vitro and in vivo**

The correlates above suggested that HDACi should only promote NMC differentiation at concentrations that cause histone hyperacetylation, irrespective of their potency against individual HDACs. To test this idea, we scored a library of structurally dissimilar HDACi for effects on NMC cells using a miniaturized high content assay that quantifies changes in bulk chromatin acetylation and expression of keratin. Supplementary Figure S2A shows an example of this analysis using NMC cells treated with the FDA-approved HDAC inhibitor vorinostat (SAHA), a clinically approved substance with prior pediatric experience. NMC cells treated with SAHA exhibit increased histone hyperacetylation and keratin expression by immunofluorescence microscopy (Supplementary Fig. S2A). Automated measurement of these phenotypes revealed a dose-dependent induction of hyperacetylation and differentiation that was inversely associated with cellular proliferation (Supplementary Fig. S2B). The effects of 9 structurally unrelated HDAC inhibitors on histone acetylation and cell growth in 2 different NMC cell lines (Table 1) were highly correlated ($R^2 = 0.96$; Supplementary Fig. S2C, Table 1), strongly suggesting that the growth inhibitory effects of these drugs is mediated through increased histone acetylation.
Epigenomic Reprogramming of NMC

Table 1. Dose–responses of NMC cell lines to treatment with 9 structurally different HDAC inhibitors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>AcLys EC50 (µmol/L)</th>
<th>Viability IC50 (µmol/L)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TC-797</td>
<td>00-143</td>
<td>Ty-82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>LBH-589</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>TSA</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>CRA-024781</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>ITF-2357</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>PXD101</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>SAHA</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>2.45</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>MGCD0103</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>MS-275</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>4.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>CI-994</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: AcLys, nuclear acetyl-lysine; EC50, concentration of drug that increases nuclear acetylation by 50% (1.5-fold induction) relative to vehicle control; IC50, concentration of drug that results in a 50% reduction in cell number relative to vehicle control.

To determine the in vivo efficacy of HDACi in NMC, we created 2 luciferized NMC cell line xenograft models (TC-797, PER-403). Tumor burden was assessed by bioluminescence imaging (Fig. 4) and tumor volume. Mice with established xenografts, defined as increasing bioluminescence and measurable tumor volumes, were divided into groups that were treated with vehicle or HDACi. For this study, we used the HDACi, LBH-589 (Novartis), an advanced second-generation investigational HDACi used extensively in mice (32) that is formulated for intravenous injection, and thus easier to administer compared with SAHA (an oral medication). Significant suppression of tumor growth, as assessed by tumor volume or bioluminescence, was apparent in both models (Fig. 4A–C). In the PER-403 xenografts where survival analysis was performed, significant survival benefit was seen in HDACi-treated mice (Fig. 4C, bottom graph). Tumors in LBH-589-treated mice showed increased levels of histone acetylation and morphologic and immunohistochemical changes (increased keratin expression) consistent with squamous differentiation (Fig. 5). Taken together, the findings indicate that HDACi induce differentiation and growth arrest of NMC cells in vitro and in vivo, providing a strong rationale for their therapeutic use in this disease.

An FDA-approved HDAC inhibitor, vorinostat, exhibits antitumor activity in a pediatric patient with NMC

NMC commonly presents in pediatric patients and invariably progresses through cytotoxic chemotherapy. Metastases frequently threaten vital structures and therapeutic options are extremely limited. As the research above was being completed, a 10-year-old child was transferred to the Children’s Hospital of Boston for management of an aggressive mediastinal mass invading the left atrium and pulmonary vein. Partial resection of this mass led to the diagnosis of NMC, based on positive immunohistochemical staining for NUT and the presence of a BRD4-NUT fusion gene by FISH (Fig. 6A). Based on the above findings, treatment of this patient with HDACi was considered, and the only clinically approved HDACi with experience in children was vorinostat (SAHA). Culture of patient-derived NMC cells (designated 8645) established in a medium optimized for the growth of carcinoma cells (24) confirmed that vorinostat induced 8645 cells to undergo squamous differentiation (Fig. 6B and C) and growth arrest (Fig. 6B–D) as assessed by Ki-67 staining and cell counts. The IC50 (based on Ki-67 fraction) and EC50 (based on keratin expression) were calculated to be 250 nmol/L, well below the known Cmax of vorinostat of 1.5–2 µmol/L. Following institutional approval and informed consent, the open-label administration of single-agent, oral vorinostat was initiated (400 mg daily). At the conclusion of 5 weeks of therapy, a marked decrease in tumor avidity for 18F-fluorodeoxyglucose was observed by positron emission tomography (PET; Fig. 6E). The responsiveness of the patient’s tumor to HDACi was confirmed by treating xenografted tumor cells from the patient with LBH-589, which produced strong growth inhibition (P = 0.0003, Fig. 6F). Tumor response in the patient was accompanied by marked thrombocytopenia (17,000–400,000/µL), an established dose-limiting toxicity of vorinostat (33). Because of severe (NCI Grade 3) nausea and emesis, the patient was unable to tolerate further vorinostat therapy, and tumor recurrence was noted on PET scans performed 5 weeks later (Fig. 6E). He was subsequently treated with a combination chemotherapy protocol, and died due to recurrent and metastatic disease 11 months after initial diagnosis.

Discussion

NMC is an incurable cancer with an average survival of 9 months or less that is defined by the presence of NUT fusion genes (11). We show here that BRD4-NUT expression is
associated with global histone hypoacetylation and transcriptional repression. The data are consistent with a recently postulated model (17) in which BRD4-NUT binds to and activates p300, thereby sequestering HAT activity to localized regions of BRD4-NUT–acetyl-chromatin binding. This in turn results in a relative overabundance of HDAC activity outside of these regions, leading to global hypoacetylation and inadequate expression of genes required for differentiation. We hypothesize that HDACi correct this imbalance by favoring HAT activity, restoring chromatin acetylation, and increasing the transcription of pro-differentiative genes.

This sequestration model is novel within the context of epithelial cancer, but precedents are found in certain leukemias (34) and neuronal degenerative diseases. Expanded polyglutamine repeats in the Huntingtin and androgen receptor proteins bind and sequester CBP/p300, resulting in global histone hypoacetylation and transcriptional repression (35–38). Moreover, the sequestration and inactivation of transcriptional cofactors in these complexes is reversible by HDAC inhibitors (36, 37).

Regardless of the precise mechanism, the reversal of BRD4-NUT–induced global hypoacetylation with HDACi is a novel
means of targeted "differentiation therapy" in cancer. The striking \textit{in vitro} and \textit{in vivo} induction of differentiation and inhibition of NMC growth by HDACi is of particular importance in this disease because there are currently 2 FDA-approved HDACi reagents, vorinostat and romidepsin, which are available for immediate clinical investigation. There is an urgent need for novel therapy in this disease because there is currently no effective therapy for NMC, which has been refractory to a number of different chemotherapeutic regimens (39). Increased recognition of NMC, enabled in part by new diagnostic tests that rely on routine IHC (26), should enhance the clinical evaluation of HDAC inhibitor drugs in this malignancy, alone and in combination with other cytotoxic agents.

Another recently reported potential means to target BRD4-NUT are small molecule bromodomain inhibitors (Brdi; ref. 40). Brdi specifically abrogate binding of acetylated histones to the bromodomains of BRD4 and BRD3, and cause differentiation of NMC cells \textit{in vitro} and in mice. Nevertheless, it is not clear what toxicity these molecules will have, as they also inhibit acetyl–histone binding of native BRD4 and BRD3, which are ubiquitously expressed proteins that may confer epigenetic "memory" on cells (41, 42). This new class of molecules is in the earliest stages of investigation and, unlike HDACi, has not been used in humans.

The most specific targeting of BRD4-NUT would be directed at NUT, which is not normally expressed outside testis or ovaries (11). This will require mapping of protein:protein interactions involving NUT at high resolution, and development of NUT-directed inhibitors. Although the development of deliverable small molecule inhibitors of this type has proven difficult, the advent of stapled peptides shows some promise to facilitate progress in this field (43).

Figure 5. Morphologic and immunophenotypic squamous differentiation correlates with increased acetylation of TC-797 xenografts treated with HDACi (LBH-589). AcL, immunohistochemistry using anti-acetyl-lysine antibody (Cell Signaling Technologies); Veh1, vehicle control (DMSO) treated mouse 1; Veh2, vehicle-treated mouse 2; LBH1, LBH-589–treated test mouse 1; LBH2, LBH-589–treated test mouse 2. Magnification (scale bar, 25 μm) is identical for all panels.
Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest

T.A. Ince: consultant, Stemgent Inc. The other authors disclosed no potential conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Dr. Stuart Schreiber and the Chemical Biology Program, Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT, Cambridge, MA, for use of equipment, and Sara Guterman, from the Clinical Trials Office at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, for her help on a moment’s notice. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Health and Human Service, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the US government.

Grant Support

This work was supported by a Dana Farber/Harvard Cancer Center Nodal Award 5P30CA06516-44 (C.A. French and J.E. Bradner), US National Institutes of Health grant 1R01CA124633 (C.A. French), the Stanley L. Robbins Memorial Award (M.D. Hofer), the National Institutes of Health grant 1K08CA128972 (J.E. Bradner), the Burroughs-Wellcome Foundation (J.E. Bradner), and funds from the National Cancer Institute’s Initiative for Chemical Genetics (Contract No. N01-CO-12400).

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Received September 27, 2010; revised January 7, 2011; accepted January 7, 2011; published OnlineFirst March 29, 2011.

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37. OF11
Differentiation of NUT Midline Carcinoma by Epigenomic Reprogramming


Cancer Res  Published OnlineFirst March 29, 2011.

Access the most recent version of this article at:
doi:10.1158/0008-5472.CAN-10-3513

Access the most recent supplemental material at:
http://cancerres.aacrjournals.org/content/suppl/2011/03/28/0008-5472.CAN-10-3513.DC1

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