



More than 40 years of glycobiology in Regensburg

1. Historical introduction and how we got to know Bill Lennarz

The 20th International Symposium on Glycoconjugates under the motto “Glycans: From Molecules to Structure to Therapeutics”, held in December 2009 in Puerto Rico, USA, started with the session: “What we have learned about glycans and what lies ahead.” We had the pleasure to contribute to this review of the past together with William J. Lennarz, Akira Kobata, Johannes F.G. Vliegthart and Roland Schauer. At this occasion contributions to the field coming from the University of Regensburg were summarized (a modified and updated version will be presented here).

In the late sixties of the last century three papers had been published, which showed that polyisoprenol derivatives constituted the lipidic moiety of so-called lipid intermediates. One of these articles was from Bill Lennarz (together with Scher and Sweeley), who was trained to be a lipid expert in Konrad Bloch's laboratory. The lipid-intermediates were found to be involved in glycosyl transfer reactions in the biosynthesis of bacterial cell surface components [1–3]. We came from the field of sugar biochemistry [4,5] and were studying the biosynthesis of mannosylated polymers of the yeast cell wall. Influenced by the above mentioned publications, we started to look also into the lipid fraction and soon published the first paper describing a lipid intermediate from eukaryotes [6]. Together with papers coming from Leloir's group [7,8] this was the entry of dolichol-phosphate activated mono- and oligosaccharides into the field of glycoproteins.

It goes without saying that the small group of people working in this special area of biochemistry got to know each other very soon. Many met at the scientific symposium honoring Luis Leloir's Nobel Prize in Bariloche, Argentina, in 1971. While touring the United States by one of us (WT) in 1974, it was clearly a highlight to have met Bill Lennarz for the first time at John Hopkins in Baltimore and to be invited to a fancy restaurant for dinner. We stayed in loose but friendly contact ever since.

In 1970 we had moved from Munich to the newly founded University of Regensburg. Carbohydrate biochemistry, mainly the biosynthesis of glycoproteins with emphasis on the role of dolichols, remained of top interest for the 40 years to come. The obvious questions of the early days were: (i) what is the nature of the lipid moiety of the *eukaryotic* intermediate, and (ii) to which acceptors do the lipid-activated saccharides get transferred? To a certain extent the race of liver and hen oviduct against yeast had started.

For yeast we could show that external, chemically phosphorylated dolichol not only stimulated the lipid-linked mannose formation, but also that the endogenous mannosyl acceptor indeed was dolichol-phosphate, 14–18 isoprene units long [9]. The accepting molecules in animals and yeast were proteins [10,11]. In yeast, however, the major amount of [¹⁴C]mannose transferred from Dol-P-[¹⁴C]Man – not commercially available of course – to protein

could be released by mild alkali treatment. This indicated a protein-(Ser/Thr)-O-Man linkage [11], whereas the animal glycoproteins were clearly Asn-linked ones [8,10]. The O-Man linkage, originally discovered by Sentandreu and Northcote was thought to be a fungal specialty and we concentrated on this type of protein glycosylation, not least because the reaction might be a promising target for a potential antifungal drug. Thus the cellular localization, the enzyme responsible for the mannosyl transfer to protein including the corresponding gene, as well as the functional importance of the mannosyl transfer from Dol-P-Man to Ser/Thr-residues of proteins was elucidated in our lab (see below).

In the late seventies, glycobiology in Regensburg gained considerably in momentum, when Manfred Sumper (joined by Felix Wieland) took over the chair of biochemistry. He and his group clarified essential dolichol-dependent steps in the biosynthesis of glycoproteins in archaea [12,13], but also started to study the role of glycoproteins and glycolipids in the development of the green algae *Volvox carteri* [14]. With a few colleagues of our University we applied for a “Collaborative Research Centre” (in German: Sonderforschungsbereich, SFB) at the German Granting Agency, DFG. We were successful, which meant, we got optimal support for our research, altogether for 24 years.

A special benefit of this funding was that we were able to organize international symposia and the first one was taking place in 1982. Among the invited speakers who accepted to visit us, were several guests from outside Germany: Stuart Kornfeld, Randy Schekman, Nathan Sharon, Ten Feizi, Peter Albersheim, Lennarz Rodén and of course Bill Lennarz (Fig. 1). Bill talked about “Studies on the Role of Glycoproteins in Embryonic Development” taking sea urchins as a model organism [15]. With this topic he pursued a new direction of glycoprotein research, which in essence turned out to be a most fruitful one. This became obvious, when the various developmental dysfunctions in humans, known as “Congenital Disorders of Glycosylation” (CDG, see below) were uncovered.

2. Protein-O-mannosylation: from yeast to *Drosophila* to man

Glycosylated proteins of baker's yeast (*Saccharomyces cerevisiae*) contain to a large extent Ser/Thr linked α 1,2- and α 1,3-mannose oligosaccharides, predominantly one to four residues long. The first mannose gets transferred to the protein via Dol-P-Man, which happens in the lumen of the endoplasmic reticulum (ER), the following residues are coming from GDP-Man in the Golgi apparatus [16,17]. The function of the lipid intermediate as a transmembrane transport vehicle was demonstrated [18]. The purification of the enzyme that catalyzes the transfer of mannose from Dol-P-Man to accepting proteins was a major challenge and set the stage to clone the first Dol-P-Man:protein O-mannosyltransferase [19]. The gene was called

PMT1, for protein mannosyltransferase, and surprisingly several years later it was shown also to exist in *Drosophila* [20], mouse and man [21–23], designated there as *POMT*, but to be absent from plants and *Caenorhabditis elegans*. With this news, the potential antifungal target, at least for human pathogens, was lost.

Our subsequent work has revealed that the PMT protein family in yeast consists of at least 6 members, which are active as specific hetero- or homo-dimers and are specific concerning the target sites, to which mannose residues are transferred [24–26]. Creating pmt mutants we demonstrated that protein O-mannosylation in yeast is essential for viability and the pmt1 knock out in mice is embryonic lethal [23,27]. Finally, we obtained evidence that O-mannosylation precedes N-glycosylation in time and can therefore prevent N-glycosylation in cases where the mannose gets linked to the canonical OH-group of the sequon [28].

In 2004 Sabine Strahl budded off to the University of Heidelberg and since then the topic of protein-O-mannosylation is best in her hands. She and her team study the enzymatic mechanism [29] as well as the functional importance of the process in yeast, mammals and humans [30,31] (for further details see also Ref. [17,32], as well as below).

3. Protein N-glycosylation: universally conserved from yeast to man

Pioneering studies in the 1970/80s from several laboratories, including Luis Leloir, Stuart Kornfeld, Phil Robbins, Robert Spiro, Frank Hemming and Bill Lennarz [33,34] paved the foundations for the N-glycosylation pathway in the ER, which is called now the dolichol cycle. The unique lipid-linked core-oligosaccharide, Glc₃Man₉GlcNAc₂-PP-Dol (LLO), sequentially build up, is the glycosyl donor for all types of N-glycans irrespective of their final structure. Upon its transfer to the protein, the mature glycan chain is formed in further processing reactions on transit from the ER via the Golgi apparatus to the plasma membrane. An important landmark has been the isolation of temperature-sensitive alg mutants (for asparagine-linked glycosylation) by Tim Huffaker and Phil Robbins [35]. These mutants were defective in LLO-assembly and allowed to define the pathway and in particular to isolate the genes encoding the respective glycosyltransferases by complementing a particular phenotype characteristic for the mutant.

Our own studies mainly in yeast but also in plants dealt with the enzymology and the biochemical as well as the molecular characterization of various membrane-bound glycosyltransferases of the LLO-assembly and of the glycosyl transfer to the protein and thus demonstrating its conservation from yeast to man [36–40]. Among these studies also the mode of tunicamycin inhibition, a versatile inhibitor of N-glycosylation, could be elucidated. It blocks specifically the formation of GlcNAc₂-PP-Dol [41]. A surprising finding was the discovery that the second GlcNAc-transferase

forming GlcNAc₂-PP-Dol is a bipartite glycosyltransferase consisting of a membrane-bound subunit, Alg14, which recruits the soluble Alg13 subunit to the cytosolic face of the ER to form the active enzyme [42]. The Alg2 enzyme turned out to be a bifunctional α 1,3- and α 1,6-mannosyltransferase converting Man₁GlcNAc₂-PP-Dol to Man₃GlcNAc₂-PP-Dol [43]; similarly the Alg11 α 1,2-mannosyltransferase catalyzes two sequential glycosylation steps, thereby elongating Man₃GlcNAc₂-PP-Dol to Man₅GlcNAc₂-PP-Dol [44], before it is translocated to the luminal side, to be further elongated to the full length Glc₃Man₉GlcNAc₂-PP-Dol donor. To understand the mechanistic details of these reactions will be a future challenge and needs crystallization of the enzymes.

An issue, to which also Bill Lennarz has substantially contributed [45,46], were investigations, dealing with the enzyme oligosaccharyltransferase (OST), sometimes called the gatekeeper of N-glycosylation. Earlier attempts to purify this enzyme failed, probably due to its instability upon solubilization and probably also due to the fact that, as it later turned out, it is a hetero-oligomeric membrane-bound complex consisting of several subunits [47–49]. Nevertheless, basic biochemical characteristics of this enzyme could be demonstrated using microsomal membranes or detergent-solubilized extracts. One of the interesting features of the enzyme certainly was that contradictory to the *in vivo* situation also transfer from GlcNAc₂-PP-Dol as the smallest oligosaccharide occurred at a similar rate as the full length donor and that the final addition of glucose residues lowered the *K_m* for the acceptor peptide [50]. The assay allowed also to study structural acceptor requirements for oligosaccharide transfer to the protein [51–53] and to verify the Asn-X-Ser/Thr consensus sequence (whereby X can be any amino acid except proline) postulated by R.D. Marshall.

When we succeeded in cooperation with the group of Markus Aebi to clone the first OST gene, *WBP1*, and realized that its overexpression did not result in an increased OST activity, we postulated that Wbp1p is a non-limiting component of a multi-component enzyme [54]. In the following genetic and biochemical studies have identified nine subunits. Wbp1, Swp1, Stt3, Ost1 and Ost2 are essential for viability of the cell, whereas Ost3, Ost4, Ost5 and Ost6 are not essential, but are required for maximal OST activity [48,55–58]. Apart from Stt3, identified as the catalytic subunit [59], the function of the various other components are largely enigmatic. The homologous Ost3 and Ost6 proteins are alternatively present in the OST and together with the other subunits form two distinct complexes [60], differing in their substrate-specific activities at the level of individual glycosylation sites [61]. The complexity of OST of eukaryotes is not fully understood, as also single subunit OSTs exist, such as in the trypanosomatid parasite *Leishmania* consisting of only Stt3. LmStt3 can substitute for the whole yeast OST complex with the glycosyl donor specificity of the parasite, i.e. broad specificity for Man-oligosaccharides. However, when incorporated into the yeast OST complex, substrate



Fig. 1. Left, Bill Lennarz together with Nathan Sharon; Middle, Bill Lennarz in front of the announcement of a “Bavarian Brotzeit”; Right, Kurt von Figura with Stuart Kornfeld.

specificity is altered and the common eukaryotic Glc₃Man₉GlcNAc₂-PP-Dol donor is transferred to the protein [62].

4. CDGs (Congenital disorders of glycosylation): demonstrating the fundamental role of sugars attached to proteins

For decades it was irritating that no general or vital role could be ascribed to such an evolutionary highly conserved protein modification like glycosylation. With the first clinical description of two patients with deficiencies in N-glycosylation by the Belgian pediatrician Jaak Jaeken in the 1980s [63], the gate has been opened for a fascinating research area dealing with glycoprotein function, but it took another 10 years before a biochemical defect could be assigned to a disease causing mutation [64]. Congenital Disorders of Glycosylation (CDG) in humans result in a severe, inherited multisystemic disease interfering with normal development of the brain and functions of the nerve-, liver-, intestinal- and muscle systems. They can be embryonic lethal depending on the glycosylation defect as revealed by respective mouse models [65]. The term CDG was originally used for defects in N-glycosylation. Defects in glycosylation steps occurring in the ER, such as in LLO-assembly or in the transfer of the core-oligosaccharide to the protein were grouped into CDG-I subtypes, whereas defects of N-glycan processing in the Golgi apparatus represent CDG-II subtypes. The field has expanded rapidly and also disorders of protein O-glycosylation, or combined of N- and O-glycosylation, as well lipid-glycosylation (GPI-anchor and glycosphingolipid glycosylation), nucleotide-sugar biosynthesis, or vesicular transport affecting glycosylation are considered as forms of CDG with the result that the CDG nomenclature has been changed using now the official gene symbol followed by the abbreviation CDG [66,67]. More than 50 disorders have been identified meanwhile and one can envision that probably any of the steps of the complex biosynthetic glycosylation pathway could result in a clinical picture.

Our experience using yeast as model to study basic principles of glycosylation led us in cooperation with clinicians into the field of CDG. Enzymatic radioactive assays for all the reactions of LLO-biosynthesis and protein-glycosylation in the ER that we have established in the yeast system could be successfully extended to human fibroblasts and helped to verify the presumptive biochemical defect in potential CDG patients [68–76]. Yeast made it also possible, to identify the corresponding human genes by searching for homologs to the yeast genes. Proof of concept and confirming the disease causing mutation was achieved by complementing the growth and LLO phenotype, the glycosyltransferase activity *in vitro*, as well as the underglycosylation of model glycoproteins of respective glycosylation defective mutants by the human gene, but not by the patient gene. It is indeed astonishing, how precisely the gene products of yeast and man have been preserved during evolution.

The biological significance of O-mannosylation in mammals was unraveled in studies of disorders belonging to the congenital dystroglycanopathies. α -Dystroglycan is the main carrier of O-Man glycans in vertebrates and these O-mannosyl glycans contribute to the binding of α -dystroglycan to the extracellular matrix proteins such as laminin [77,78]. Compared to CDG types of N-glycosylation, which are multi-organ diseases with neurological involvement, the clinical hallmarks of O-glycosylation defects are the pathology of muscle, eye and brain. Deficiencies in O-mannosyltransferases POMT1 and POMT2 [21,22] that were identified due to the homology to the Pmts from yeast and the study of their biochemistry, have been associated with one of the most severe forms of congenital muscular dystrophies, the Walker-Warburg syndrome [23,79]. Mutations in glycosyltransferases extending the Man-O-protein linkage result in Muscle-Eye-Brain, Fukuyama-type and Limb-Girdle muscular dystrophies [17,67]. Besides

its role in muscle cell adhesion, α -dystroglycan is also involved in migration of neuronal cells during retinal development. Hence, in contrast to the multisystemic CDG forms caused by defects in N-glycosylation, the molecular details of faulty protein O-mannosylation are partially understood.

5. Outlook

In the field of protein glycosylation the cooperation between yeast and mammalian, respectively human molecular biology and biochemistry has been extremely fruitful, although the yeast work was started as purely basic investigation. This is another example arguing against short sighted political decisions to decrease support for research that is not applied or medically oriented to begin with.

Acknowledgment

We thank Sabine Strahl for reading our manuscript. All our own work mentioned in this review has been supported by the DFG, the Fonds der Chemischen Industrie and the Körber Stiftung.

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