

Role of two conserved glycine residues in the β -propeller domain of the integrin $\alpha 4$ subunit in VLA-4 conformation and function

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Abstract The N-terminal region of the α integrin subunits is predicted to fold into a β -propeller domain. Using K562 $\alpha 4$ transfectants we show that mutations at $\alpha 4$ subunit residues Gly¹³⁰ and Gly¹⁹⁰ affect the conformation of this domain causing a reduction in the recognition of $\alpha 4$ by anti- $\alpha 4$ antibodies which map to the β -propeller. The improper $\alpha 4$ conformation also led to an altered association with the $\beta 1$ subunit, and to a lack of $\alpha 4\beta 1$ adhesion to VCAM-1 and CS-1/fibronectin, as well as an abolishment of anti- $\alpha 4$ - and anti- $\beta 1$ -dependent homotypic aggregation. The total conservation of Gly¹³⁰ and Gly¹⁹⁰ among integrin α subunits suggests their importance in the correct folding of their respective β -propeller domains, and thus, in the adhesive activity of the integrins.

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Key words: $\alpha 4$ integrin; β -propeller; Adhesion

1. Introduction

VLA-4 ($\alpha 4\beta 1$) is a member of the $\beta 1$ subfamily of the integrins, which mediates cell adhesion to the connecting segment-I (CS-1) region of fibronectin, and to vascular cell adhesion molecule-1 (VCAM-1) [1–5]. VLA-4, as well as other $\beta 1$ integrins, can exist in different states of activation [6], and their activity can be rapidly modulated by various stimuli, including divalent cations and certain anti-integrin $\beta 1$ subunit monoclonal antibodies (mAb) [6–8]. Interaction with other sequences on fibronectin [9–11], as well as with thrombospondin [12], requires VLA-4 to be activated. VLA-4 also interacts with the bacterial coat protein invasins in an activation-independent manner [13].

VLA-4 is involved in leukocyte recruitment to sites of inflammation, and it has been implicated in several inflammatory pathologies [14,15]. In addition, VLA-4 participates in the adhesion of hematopoietic progenitors to bone marrow stroma [16,17], and it is required for normal development of both T and B cells in the bone marrow [18].

A characteristic feature of integrin α subunit N-terminal domains is the presence of seven homologous repeats of approximately 60 amino acids each [19], which have been proposed to fold into a β -propeller domain, based on the presence of potential secondary structures of integrin α subunits similar to the secondary structures found in several proteins with β -propeller domains [20]. According to this model, the upper surface of the β -propeller contains the α subunit ligand-

binding sites. Different epitopes involved in VLA-4-mediated cell adhesion are predicted to be present on this upper surface of the $\alpha 4$ β -propeller. The epitope B includes the main interaction sites with CS-1-containing fibronectin (FN) fragments and with VCAM-1, and it has been subdivided into epitopes B1 and B2, since some of the antibodies which blocked these interactions also triggered homotypic cell aggregation [21]. Using $\alpha 4$ murine/human chimeric constructs expressed in mammalian cells, it has been shown that epitopes B1 and B2 map to $\alpha 4$ residues 100–268 [22,23]. We recently reported that $\alpha 4$ amino acids 151–155 are important for the structure of the epitope B2 and that mutations at $\alpha 4$ Gln¹⁵² substantially impaired transfectant adhesion to a CS-1-containing fragment of fibronectin [24]. The $\alpha 4$ epitope A maps to the most $\alpha 4$ N-terminal 100 amino acids, is partially involved in cell adhesion to CS-1/FN but not to VCAM-1, and mAb against this epitope are also able to induce homotypic aggregation [21–23]. We previously showed that $\alpha 4$ residues Arg⁸⁹Asp⁹⁰ form part of the epitope A, and are implicated in the modulation of VLA-4 adhesion to CS-1/FN [25].

The folding of the different functional epitopes in the β -propeller domain is therefore essential for the correct activity of VLA-4. The implication of small regions or individual residues in the folding of this domain remains to be solved. In the present study we have investigated the participation of two glycine residues located on the epitope B of $\alpha 4$ which are totally conserved among α subunits, in the folding of the $\alpha 4$ β -propeller domain and in the function of VLA-4.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Cells, VLA-4 ligand proteins and antibodies

The human cell line K562 was cultured in PRMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum and antibiotics (complete medium). K562 $\alpha 4$ transfectants were maintained in the same medium containing 1 mg/ml of G418 (Calbiochem). The recombinant FN-H89 fragment of fibronectin which contains the CS-1 site, and recombinant soluble VCAM-1 (sVCAM-1) consisting of domains 1 to 4 were generated as previously described [24]. Monoclonal antibodies used in this study included P3X63 [26], TP1/36 (anti-CD43) [27], TS2/16 and Lia 1/2.1 (anti-VLA- $\beta 1$ subunit) [28,29], SAM-1 (anti- $\alpha 5$) [30], and the following anti- $\alpha 4$: HP1/7, HP1/2, HP2/1, HP2/4 [31], and B-5G10 [32].

2.2. Site-directed mutagenesis and transfections

The $\alpha 4$ cDNA in Bluescript [19] was subjected to site-directed mutagenesis using the Bio-Rad Muta-Gene kit, as recommended. Oligonucleotides representing $\alpha 4$ bp 513–544 (for G130R) and 692–721 (for G190S) were used as primers containing selected mismatches. Transfectants expressing mutations at $\alpha 4$ Asn¹²³Glu¹²⁴ have been described [24]. Base substitutions at sites of mutations raised new endonuclease restriction sites, which facilitated the identification of the mutations introduced, that were later confirmed by DNA sequencing using a Perkin-Elmer automatic DNA sequencer (Model ABI Prism). Mutated $\alpha 4$ inserts were excised and ligated into the pFNeo expression

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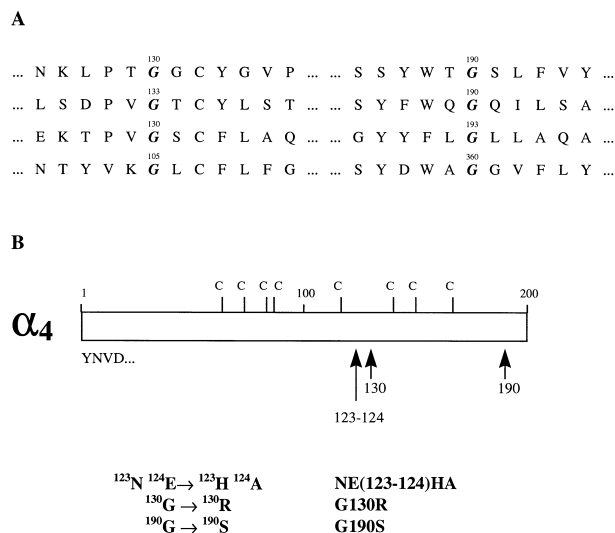


Fig. 1. Sequence alignments and mutagenesis of the integrin $\alpha 4$ subunit. A: Alignments of a segment at the N-terminal end of the $\alpha 4$ subunit which includes the residues Gly¹³⁰ and Gly¹⁹⁰, and the corresponding on $\alpha 5$, αIIb and αM subunits. Glycines in bold are located at structurally equivalent loop positions in the β -propeller domain. B: Schematic diagram of the N-terminal end of $\alpha 4$ and site-directed mutagenesis of the $\alpha 4$ cDNA. Shown are the single and double mutations introduced on selected $\alpha 4$ residues and the designation of the $\alpha 4$ mutant transfectants. C denotes the cysteine residues.

vector [33,34] in *SalI-XbaI* sites. For transfection, 25 μg of pFNeo vector containing mutant $\alpha 4$ was electroporated into 10^7 K562 cells, and after 48 h, 1 mg/ml of G418 was added to the media. G418-resistant cells were analyzed by flow cytometry using a Coulter Epics XL, and enriched for VLA-4-positive cells by immunomagnetic bead selection (Dynal Co. Norway), using the anti- $\alpha 4$ mAb B-5G10.

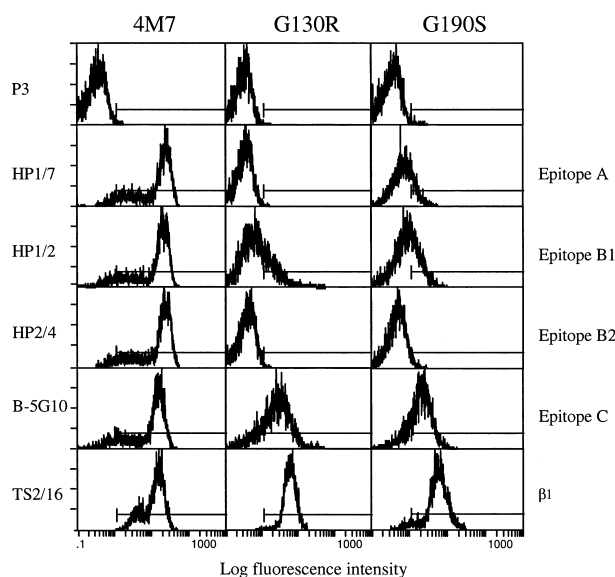


Fig. 2. Flow cytometry analysis of K562 $\alpha 4$ transfectants. 4M7 (wild-type $\alpha 4$ transfectants) and the mutant G130R and G190S were incubated at 4°C for 40 min with saturating concentrations of different anti- $\alpha 4$, anti- $\beta 1$ or control mAb. After washing, cells were incubated at 4°C for 30 min with FITC-conjugated secondary antibody (Dako, Denmark), and finally analyzed using a Coulter Epics XL flow cytometer.

2.3. Cell labeling and immunoprecipitation

Transfectants were surface-labeled with Na^{125}I (Amersham Corporation, UK) using lactoperoxidase, and solubilized with 0.5% NP-40 as previously reported [34]. For immunoprecipitation, the supernatants were precleared with Protein A-Sepharose beads, followed by incubation at 4°C with antibodies. The immunocomplexes were harvested by incubation with Protein A-Sepharose beads, boiled and analyzed by SDS-PAGE using 7% polyacrylamide gels and non-reducing conditions.

2.4. Cell adhesion and aggregation assays

For cell adhesion, $\alpha 4$ transfectants or K562 cells were labeled in complete medium with the fluorescent dye BCECF-AM (Molecular Probes, the Netherlands), and then added in RPMI medium containing 0.4% BSA to 96-well dishes (Costar) (6×10^4 cells/well) coated with FN-H89 or sVCAM-1 (100 μl /well). After incubation for 20 min at 37°C , unbound cells were removed by three washes with RPMI medium, and adhered cells quantified using a fluorescence analyzer (CytoFluor 2300, Millipore Co.). Homotypic cell aggregation assays were performed essentially as described [35], and the degree of cell aggregation was measured at 3, 7 and 20 h in a semiquantitative manner as reported [36].

3. Results

Within the N-terminal 200 amino acids of the β -propeller $\alpha 4$ integrin subunit domain, two glycine residues at positions 130 and 190 are completely conserved among integrin α subunits (Fig. 1A) and are found at structurally equivalent sites in this domain, the loops connecting strands 2 and 3 of the W2 and W3 sheets, respectively [20]. According to the Pepti-structure program, the Gly¹³⁰ is contained in a random coil sequence, while the Gly¹⁹⁰ forms part of a predicted β -turn, as previously reported [37]. To investigate the importance of $\alpha 4$ Gly¹³⁰ and Gly¹⁹⁰ on the structure and function of VLA-4, we mutagenized both residues and the mutated full length $\alpha 4$ cDNAs in the expression vector pFNeo were transfected into VLA-4-negative K562 cells. The resulting geneticin-resistant transfectants were designated as indicated in Fig. 1B. We also used throughout the work the NE(123–124)HA transfectants which express $\alpha 4$ mutated at Asn¹²³Glu¹²⁴, that have

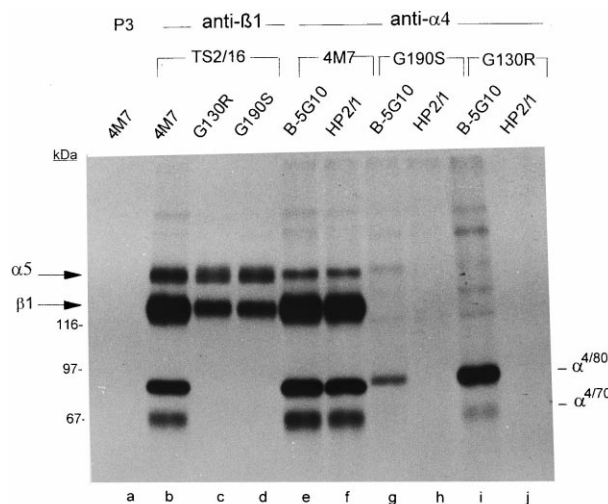


Fig. 3. Cell surface labeling of $\alpha 4$ transfectants. 4M7, G190S and G130R were surface iodinated, solubilized and immunoprecipitated with anti- $\alpha 4$ B-5G10 or HP2/1, anti- $\beta 1$ TS2/16 or with control P3 mAb. Immunoprecipitates were analyzed by electrophoresis using 7% polyacrylamide gels, and bands detected by autoradiography. Indicated are the migrations of $\alpha 5$, $\alpha 4^{80}$, $\alpha 4^{70}$ and $\beta 1$ subunits.

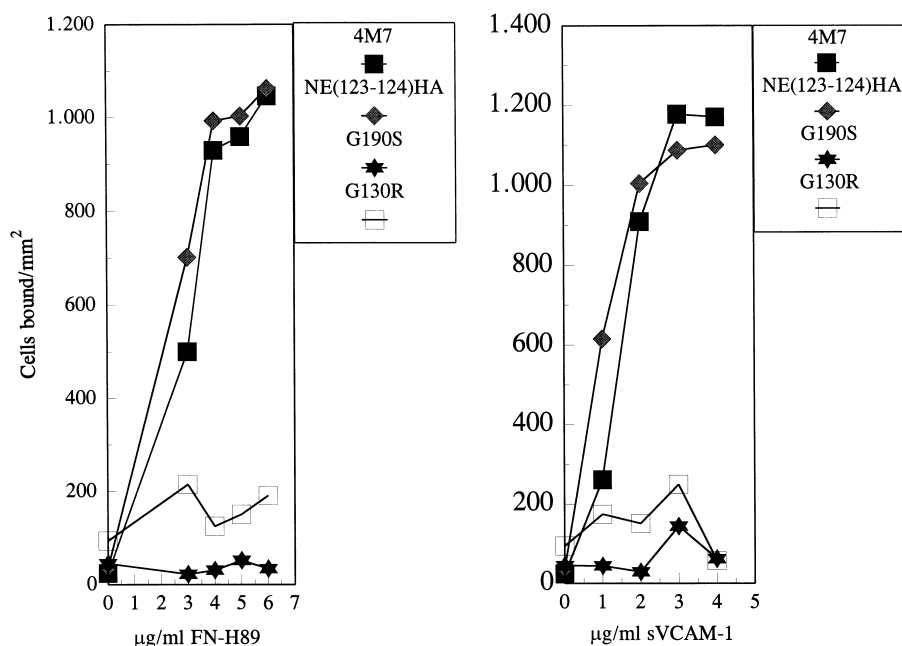


Fig. 4. Adhesion of $\alpha 4$ transfectants to FN-H89 and sVCAM-1. Cells were labeled with BCECF-AM and added to 96-well microtiter plates coated with increasing concentrations of FN-H89 or sVCAM-1. After 20 min incubation at 37°C, plates were washed and adhesion was quantified using a fluorescence analyzer. Each panel shows a representative result from at least four experiments and each point is the mean of triplicate determinations, with a standard deviation of < 10%. K562 cells showed no adhesion at any concentration of FN-H89 or sVCAM-1 tested (not shown).

previously been characterized [24]. Analysis of G130R and G190S transfectants by flow cytometry showed a very similar pattern of $\alpha 4$ reactivity with anti- $\alpha 4$ mAb which binds to different regions on the $\alpha 4$ molecule [21–23]. Epitopes A and B2 on $\alpha 4$ were clearly unreactive towards anti- $\alpha 4$ HP1/7 and HP2/4 mAb, respectively, while some reactivity was observed with the epitope B1 HP1/2 mAb (Fig. 2). The epitope C B-5G10 mAb reacted to a higher degree with $\alpha 4$ mutated at Gly¹³⁰ than with $\alpha 4$ mutated at Gly¹⁹⁰. In contrast, $\alpha 4$ on 4M7 wild-type transfectants (Fig. 2 and [25]), as well as on NE(123–124)HA transfectant mutants (not shown, [24]), reacted comparably with all anti- $\alpha 4$ mAb.

The $\alpha 4$ subunit on the 4M7 cells showed a typical pattern of cleaved $\alpha 4^{80}$ and $\alpha 4^{70}$ proteolytic fragments expression [34], which were associated on the cell surface with the $\beta 1$ subunit (Fig. 3, lanes b, e, f) as detected in cell surface iodination followed by immunoprecipitation using anti- $\alpha 4$ epitope C B-5G10 or epitope B1 HP2/1, or anti- $\beta 1$ TS2/16 mAb. The 80 kDa and 70 kDa $\alpha 4$ fragments from G130R and G190S

transfectants were detected in immunoprecipitates using B-5G10 but not HP2/1 mAb (Fig. 3, lanes g, h, i, j). In the same cells, the endogenous $\beta 1$ subunit immunoprecipitated by TS2/16 migrated in SDS-PAGE identically to $\beta 1$ from 4M7 transfectants, and the same antibody co-immunoprecipitated the $\alpha 5$, but not the $\alpha 4$ subunit in G130R and G190S cells (Fig. 3, lanes c, d). Likewise, the B-5G10 mAb failed to co-immunoprecipitate the endogenous $\beta 1$ subunit in G130R and G190S cells (Fig. 3, lanes g, i), although we detected two iodinated polypeptides specifically co-immunoprecipitated by this antibody, showing an electrophoretic mobility close to endogenous $\beta 1$, which were absent in the TS2/16 immunoprecipitates. Experiments of immunoprecipitation with B-5G10 of lysates from these cells, followed by Western blot using the TS2/16 anti- $\beta 1$ mAb, did not reveal any associated $\beta 1$ subunit (not shown), suggesting that $\alpha 4\beta 1$ association is probably very weak and it might be lost during cell lysis/immunoprecipitation.

The adhesion of G130R to sVCAM-1 and to FN-H89, a

Table 1

Homotypic aggregation of wild-type and mutant $\alpha 4$ transfectants induced by anti- $\alpha 4$ mAb which recognize different epitopes on the $\alpha 4$ subunit

Cells	CD43		$\beta 1$	$\alpha 4$			
	P3	TP1/36	Lia1/2	HP1/7	HP2/1	HP2/4	B-5G10
K562	0	5	0	0	0	0	0
4M7	0	5	5	4	2	4	0
NE(123–124)HA	0	5	5	4	2	4	0
G130R	0	5	1	0	0	0	0
G190S	0	5	1	0	0	0	0

K562 or transfectant K562 cells were incubated for 3 h with anti- $\beta 1$ or with anti- $\alpha 4$ epitope A (HP1/7, B1 (HP2/1), B2 (HP2/4), or C (B-5G10)). Cell aggregation was scored visually: 0, no aggregation; 1, < 10% of cells aggregating; 2, 10–50% of cells aggregating; 3, 50–80% of cells aggregating; 4, > 80% of cells in small aggregates; 5, > 90% of cells in large and compact aggregates. No aggregation and nearly 100% aggregation were determined with the controls P3X63 and TP1/36 mAb, respectively.

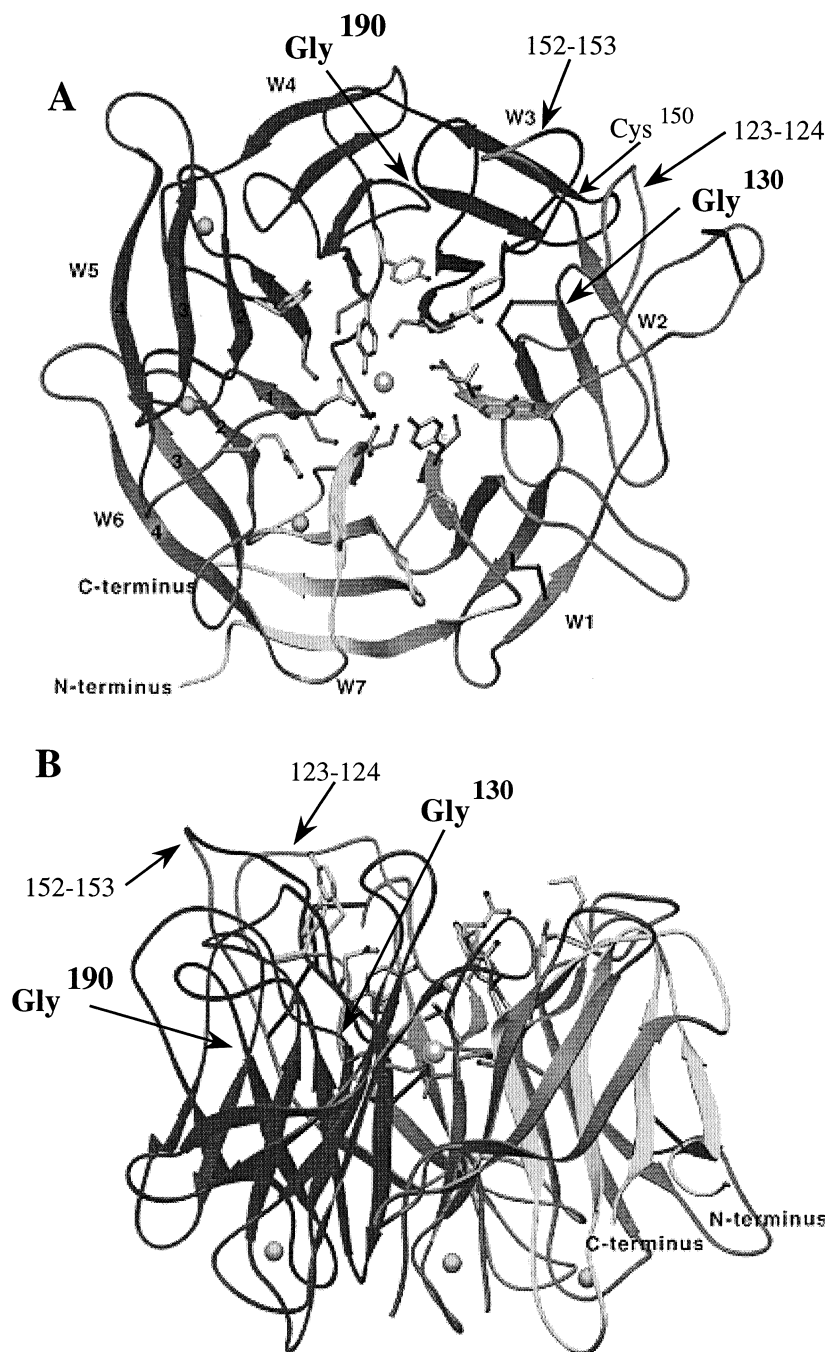


Fig. 5. Localization of Gly¹³⁰ and Gly¹⁹⁰ on the model for the integrin $\alpha 4$ subunit β -propeller domain (20). A: Top view. B: Side view. Also indicated are the positions for Gln¹⁵²Asp¹⁵³ and Asn¹²³Glu¹²⁴. The Cys¹⁵⁰ is shown to help the identification of other residues.

fibronectin fragment which contains the CS-1 region, was dramatically impaired, whereas G190S cells showed a minimal adhesion to high sVCAM-1 concentrations, but not to FN-H89 (Fig. 4). In contrast, NE(123–124)HA and 4M7 transfectants adhered efficiently to increasing concentration of the ligands. The adhesion of G130R and G190S could not be restored by the stimuli TS2/16 or by Mn²⁺ ions, known to increase the affinity of VLA heterodimers for their ligands, nor by PMA, an agent that stimulates the clustering of integrins at the cell surface (not shown).

Homotypic aggregation assays showed a total absence of response to the epitope A HP1/7 and epitope B2 HP2/4 mAb by G130R and G190S cells, while high degree of aggregation was induced by these mAb in 4M7 and NE(123–124)HA transfectants (Table 1). Interestingly, G130R and G190S cells even failed to aggregate in response to the anti- $\beta 1$ Lia 1/2.1 mAb. As anti-B1 mAb-mediated homotypic aggregation is dependent on the presence of cell surface VLA-4 [38], these data support the hypothesis of an altered $\alpha 4\beta 1$ cell surface association. All transfectants aggregated equally well

in response to the positive control TP1/36 anti-CD43 mAb (Table 1).

4. Discussion

In this study we show that mutations at two glycines on the $\alpha 4$ subunit at positions 130 and 190 affect the conformation of $\alpha 4$, its association with the $\beta 1$ subunit, and leads to a lack of VLA-4-mediated adhesive activity. Both glycines are located on structurally equivalent loops on the $\alpha 4$ β -propeller upper surface (Fig. 5), which has been proposed to contain key sites for interaction of VLA-4 with its ligands [20]. The total conservation of these glycines among α integrin subunits suggests that they might play an important role in the correct folding of the β -propeller domain and the whole α subunit molecules. That $\alpha 4$ mutated at glycines 130–190 has an incorrect conformation is supported by results showing a marked decrease in its reactivity with antibodies which recognize structurally distant regions on the β -propeller domain, such as $\alpha 4$ epitopes A, B1 and B2. This could be the consequence of the introduction of the substitutions at Gly¹³⁰ and Gly¹⁹⁰ which might disrupt the structure of the loops connecting strands 2 and 3 of W2 and W3 sheets, respectively. An additional mechanism contributing to the lack of recognition of the β -propeller domain by anti- $\alpha 4$ mAb could involve the incorrect association of $\alpha 4$ with the $\beta 1$ subunit, similarly to what has been observed with anti- αL (CD11a) antibodies which map to the β -propeller of this α subunit [39].

Transfectant surface iodination and immunoprecipitation experiments showed that in spite of the fact that the endogenous $\beta 1$ subunit is expressed on the K562 $\alpha 4$ transfectants in association with the $\alpha 5$ subunit, no endogenous $\beta 1$ subunit was clearly detected in association with mutant $\alpha 4$. We did observe, however, two iodinated proteins on the cell surface of the mutant transfectants, specifically co-immunoprecipitated by anti- $\alpha 4$ mAb. Whether these two proteins correspond to anomalously processed $\beta 1$ forms remains to be studied. It is well accepted that the integrin β subunits are made in excess over the α subunits, and that non-associated α or β subunits are not transported to the cell surface, but remain in cytoplasmic vesicles before they are degraded [40,41]. The present data indicate that $\alpha 4$ mutated at Gly¹³⁰ and Gly¹⁹⁰ is expressed on the surface of the transfectants in an altered conformation, and suggest that it might be defectively associated with unprocessed $\beta 1$ forms, this association being very weak and probably lost during lysis and immunoprecipitation procedures. The addition of Mn²⁺ ions during lysis/immunoprecipitation did not influence the degree nor the quality of the recovered $\beta 1$ subunits (not shown). Functional data supporting this hypothesis come from homotypic aggregation results, which show that not only aggregating anti- $\alpha 4$ mAb failed to induce response, but even aggregating anti- $\beta 1$ mAb failed to do so, indicating that considerable conformational changes had occurred on the $\alpha 4\beta 1$ heterodimer. In another previous study it was also noticed a considerable reduction in the $\beta 1$ subunit co-immunoprecipitated with anti- $\alpha 4$ antibodies from transfectants expressing $\alpha 4$ mutated at Gly¹⁹⁰ [37], which confirm the present results.

As expected from an altered $\alpha 4\beta 1$ association and incorrect $\alpha 4$ conformation, transfectants expressing mutations at $\alpha 4$ Gly¹³⁰ and Gly¹⁹⁰ showed a dramatic impairment of VLA-4-mediated adhesion to VCAM-1 and FN-H89. The adhesion of

G130R and G190S to VLA-4 ligands was not restored by stimuli which increase the affinity or the avidity of VLA heterodimers for their ligands, confirming that an important change in $\alpha 4\beta 1$ conformation had occurred, and that the adhesion impairment was not due to affinity or avidity modulation. These results do not rule out that Gly¹³⁰ and Gly¹⁹⁰ could play some role in VLA-4 adhesion to its ligands. An $\alpha 4$ amino acid which is likely to be essential in the interaction of VLA-4 with VCAM-1 and CS-1 is Tyr¹⁸⁷, which is found on the top surface of the β -propeller [37,42]. We have also shown that $\alpha 4$ residues Gln¹⁵² Asp¹⁵³, which are located on the upper surface of the β -propeller (Fig. 5), modulate VLA-4-mediated adhesion to fibronectin [24], probably by influencing the structure of the ligand-binding site, where the Tyr¹⁸⁷ is found.

The results from the present studies will contribute to a better knowledge of the relations between the structure and the function of the integrins.

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