Title: Characterization of the zebrafish *gabra1$^{sa43718/sa43718}$* germline loss of function allele
confirms a function for Gabra1 in motility and nervous system development.

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**Summary**

Mutation of the *GABRA1* gene is associated with neurodevelopmental defects and epilepsy. *GABRA1* encodes for the α1 subunit of the gamma-aminobutyric acid type A receptor (GABA$_A$R), which regulates the fast inhibitory impulses of the nervous system. Multiple model systems have previously been developed to understand the function of *GABRA1* during development, but these models have produced complex and at times incongruent data. Thus, additional model systems are required to validate and substantiate previously published results. We investigated the behavioral swim patterns associated with a nonsense mutation of the zebrafish *gabra1* (*sa43718* allele) gene. The *sa43718* allele causes a decrease in *gabra1* mRNA expression, which is associated with light induced hypermotility, one phenotype associated with seizure like behavior in zebrafish. Mutation of *gabra1* was accompanied by decreased mRNA expression of *gabra2, gabra3, and gabra5,* indicating a reduction in the expression of additional alpha sub-units of the GABA$_A$R. Although multiple sub-units were decreased in total expression, larvae continued to respond to pentylenetetrazole (PTZ) indicating that a residual GABA$_A$R exists in the *sa43718* allele. Proteomics analysis demonstrated that nonsense mutation of *gabra1* is associated with abnormal expression of proteins that regulate proton transport, ion homeostasis, vesicle transport, and mitochondrial protein complexes. These data support previous studies performed in a zebrafish nonsense allele created by CRISPR/Cas9 and validate that loss of function mutations in the *gabra1* gene result in seizure like phenotypes with abnormal function of inhibitory synapses.

**Keywords**: zebrafish, seizure, GABRA1, GABA

## Introduction

The gamma-aminobutyric acid type A receptor ($GABA_AR$) is a multi-subunit ion channel that mediates inhibitory synapses of the nervous system. The $GABA_AR$ can be composed of unique combinations of any of the following: 6 α subunits, 3 β subunits, 3 γ subunits, and one ε, δ, θ, or π subunits. The most common $GABA_AR$ in mammals consists of 2 α subunits, 2 β subunits, and γ subunit. Each of the subunits is encoded by an independent gene, each of which are located on different chromosomes. Mutations in many of these subunits have been associated with seizure phenotypes in humans [1] and most recently we used whole exome sequencing to identify a putative heterozygous mutation in the *GABRA1* gene (c.875C>T) associated with seizure phenotypes [2]. *GABRA1* encodes for the α1 subunit of the $GABA_AR$ and to date, over 30 different variants in the *GABRA1* gene have been reported and associated with neurological disorders and neurodevelopmental defects [2–11]. Subsequent studies have demonstrated that the c.875C>T mutation is a loss of function allele that reduces single channel open time [12].

Several murine models have been developed to investigate the physiological and behavioral functions of *GABRA1* in mammals, however, the phenotypic outcomes are heterogeneous. For instance, deletion of *Gabra1* or the knock-in of the p.Ala332Asp allele cause behavioral phenotypes that range from tremors/absence-like seizures to the development of myoclonic seizures at postnatal stages [13–16]. These phenotypes have been strain, age, and sex specific, which makes interpretation of results difficult. Additional zebrafish models have been characterized including a germline mutant and a morpholino mediated transient knockdown. These two studies yielded contrasting results whereby hypermotility was observed in a nonsense mutant of *gabra1* and hypomotility was observed after transient knockdown [2,17]. Thus, additional validatory models are required to understand the function of *gabra1* during early development .

In 2016, the zebrafish mutation project was completed by the Wellcome Sanger Institute,

where over 40,000 mutant alleles, covering 60% of zebrafish protein-coding genes, were

generated [18]. However, only a small number of alleles have been characterized or associated

with a specific phenotype. An allele carrying a nonsense mutation in the *gabra1* gene (*sa43718*)

was generated through N-ethyl-N-nitrosourea treatment and remains uncharacterized. We

hypothesized that a more comprehensive analysis of this allele could discern the disparate

phenotypes observed across other zebrafish models (nonsense versus transient knockdown).

We therefore performed behavioral and molecular analysis of the sa43718 allele.

Our results indicate that homozygous *gabra1$^{sa43718/sa43718}$* larvae show hyperactive

locomotion (seizure-like behavior) upon a light stimulus. Interestingly, despite a significant

reduction in *gabra1* mRNA expression, homozygous mutants continued to respond to

pentylenetetrazole (PTZ), which binds to and antagonizes the $GABA_AR$. Based on this

response, we hypothesized that other Gabra alpha sub-units had increased expression and

integrated in $GABA_AR$ resulting in a blunted, but consistent PTZ response. However, we did not

detect up-regulation of other alpha sub-units and our analysis revealed reduced expression of

*gabra1*, *gabra2*, *gabra3*, and *gabra5*. Consistent with the decrease in multiple alpha sub-units,

proteomics analysis identified abnormal expression of proteins that regulate proton transport,

sodium ion homeostasis across the plasma membrane, synapse development, and the

mitochondrial inner membrane protein complex and respiratory chain, thus suggesting abnormal

development of the nervous system inhibitory response.

**Results**

**Experimental model and animal husbandry**

The *gabra1$^{sa43718/+}$* allele (N=10 female fish) was obtained from Sanger Institute through the

Zebrafish International Resource Center (ZIRC). Female carriers were outcrossed with wildtype

(AB) males to generate independent families of heterozygous male and female carriers. For all

experiments, zebrafish larvae were obtained by mating adult heterozygous $gabra1^{sa43718/+}$ fish.

Collected zebrafish embryos were maintained in E3 media (5mM NaCl, 0.17mM KCl, 0.33mM

$CaCl_2$, 0.33mM MgSO4, 0.05% methylene blue, pH 7.4) at 28°C under 14:10 light: dark cycle.

All experimental procedures were performed at 5 days post fertilization (DPF). All animals were

maintained and used in accordance with the guidelines from the University of Texas at El Paso

Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (Animal Protocol Number 811869-5). Euthanasia

and anesthesia were performed according with the American Veterinary Medical Association

(AVMA) guidelines for the euthanasia, 2020 edition.

**Genotyping**

Genotyping of the $gabra1^{sa4371/sa4371}$ allele was performed by PCR amplification and restriction

enzyme digest. Adult fin clips and larval tails were lysed in lysis buffer (30ul) (50mM sodium

hydroxide) for 5 minutes at 95°C followed by 10 minutes at 4°C. DNA was then neutralized by

addition of 500mM Tris-HCL solution pH 8.0 (6ul) and used directly for PCR. The fragment of

interest (237bp) was amplified by standard PCR at an annealing temperature of 60°C (forward:

TTGTGACTCAAAGCCACGAG and reverse: TGAGACGAGAACCATCGTCA). PCR amplicon

containing the $sa43718$ allele region, was digested with XhoI (New England Biolabs) at 37°C

according to manufacturer's guidelines. The mutation present in the $sa43718$ inhibits cleavage

by XhoI allowing differentiation of wildtype, heterozygous, and homozygous offspring.

**Behavioral analysis and pentylenetetrazole (PTZ) treatment**

Behavioral analysis was performed using the ZebraBox (ViewPoint Behavioral Technology,

Montreal, Canada). Briefly, embryos were obtained by natural spawning and raised to 5 DPF.

Larvae (5 DPF) were individually tracked for swim speed and total distance swam in a 96-well

plate. The behavioral analysis consisted of 15 minutes divided into 5-minute intervals of

dark/light/dark conditions. All larvae were acclimated to the chamber for 1 hour prior to data

acquisition [2]. Data was collected each minute, for a total of 15 minutes and total distance

traveled (mm) and speed (mm/s) was calculated as previously described [2]. Experiments were

performed in biological duplicates using a minimum of N=30 larvae per trial. Treatment with

10mM pentylenetetrazol (PTZ) (Millipore-Sigma) was performed as previously described [2].

Genotyping of each larvae was performed after behavioral analysis.

**Quantitative real time PCR (qPCR)**

Total RNA was isolated from brain homogenates at 5 DPF from wildtype and homozygous

larvae using TRIzol reagent (ThermoFisher) and Directzol columns (Zymo) according to

manufacturer instructions. RNA was reverse transcribed using the Verso cDNA Synthesis Kit

(ThermoFisher) and total RNA (1ug) was normalized across samples. Gene expression was

measured in biological triplicates using a pool of at least N=10-12 larvae per biological replicate.

For each individual biological replicate, technical replicates were performed as internal controls

for the quantitative PCR (qPCR). The Applied Biosystems StepOne Plus machine with Applied

Biosystems associated software was used for qPCR analysis. Sybr green (ThermoFisher)

based primer pairs were designed for each gene analyzed: *gabra1* (FWD:

TTTTGCTCCGAACATTGCCA, REV: CCGAATAGCAGTGGGAAAGC), g*abra2a* (FWD:

GATGGCTACGACAACAGGCT, REV: TGTCCATCGCTGTCGGAAAA), *gabra3* (FWD:

GCTGAAGTTCGGGAGCTATG, REV: GGAGCTGATGGTCTCTTTGC), *gabra4* (FWD:

GACTGCGATGTACCCCACTT, REV: ATCCAGGTCGGAGTCTGTTG), *gabra5* FWD:

CATGACAACACCCAACAAGC, REV: CAGGGCCTTTTGTCCATTTA), *gabra6a* (FWD:

TCGCGTACCCATCTTTCTTC, REV: CCCTGAGCTTTTCCAGAGTG), *gabrb2* (FWD:

CCCGACACCTATTTCCTCAA, REV: TCTCGATCTCCAGTGTGCAG), *gabrg2* (FWD:

ACACCCAATAGGATGCTTCG, REV: AGCTGCGCTTCCACTTGTAT). *gapdh* (FWD:

GGCAAGCTTACTGGTATGGC, REV: TGAGAGCAATACCAGCACCA) expression was used as

a reference gene for $2^{\Delta\Delta ct}$ quantification. Statistical analysis performed using a *t-test*.

**Protein isolation**

For protein analysis, total protein was obtained from a pool of whole brain homogenates (n=9)

per genotype. Two biological replicates per genotype were collected for a total of 18 brains.

Brains were excised and stored for protein isolation in 1X Cell Lysis Buffer (Cell Signaling) with

protease inhibitors cocktail (ThermoFisher). DNA was isolated from the tail tissue for genotyping

and protein was isolated from brain homogenates using manual homogenization. Protein

quantification was performed using Precision Red Protein Assay Reagent (Cytoskeleton)

according to manufacturer's instructions. Samples were then sent to the Biomolecule Analysis

and Omics Unit (BAOU) at The University of Texas El Paso for sample processing and

proteomic analysis.

**Sample preparation for proteomics**

Proteins were purified by trichloroacetic acid (TCA) protein precipitation. Fifty microliters of

100% TCA (Sigma/Millipore - cat# T6399-5G) was added to 200 µL of sample in 1x Cell Lysis

Buffer (Safe Seal microcentrifuge tubes, Sorenson BioScience, cat. No. 12030) and incubated

at 4°C for 10 minutes. Total protein ranged from 2 – 5 µg per sample. The precipitated proteins

were pelleted by centrifugation for five minutes at 14,000 rcf and the supernatant was

discarded. The protein pellet was subsequently washed a total of three times with 200 µL LCMS

grade acetone by resuspension and pelleting, the acetone supernatant was discarded each

time. Residual acetone was evaporated using a heating block at 95°C for 2 minutes. Samples

were stored as a pellet at -80°C until processing for proteomic analysis. Stored pellets were

resuspended in 8M Urea prior and subjected to enzymatic tryptic digestion using the PreOmics

iST sample preparation kit (catalog no. iST 96x P.O.00027). Briefly, denaturation, alkylation,

and reduction were performed with 10 μL LYSE buffer per 1 μg of protein and heated at 80 °C

for 20 min while being mixed every 5-minutes. Remaining droplets on the cap were given a brief

centrifugation (RT; 300 rcf; 10 sec) and samples were sonicated ten times at 30-second on/off

intervals for a total of 5 minutes. Fifty microliters of resuspended DIGEST solution were added

to the samples for protein digestion. Sample-filled microtubes were gently vortexed, centrifuged

and kept for 90 minutes at 37°C in a heating block. Throughout the 90-minute incubation period,

samples were gently mixed every 10 minutes. One hundred microliters of STOP solution were

added and mixed by pipetting ten times. Samples were then transferred to the cartridge and

centrifuged for 1 minute at 3,800 rcf, followed by subsequent 200 μL washes with WASH 1 and

WASH 2 solutions according to the manufacturer's instructions. Peptides were eluted in two

cycles of 100 μL of ELUTE solution and dried completely in a vacuum evaporator (Savant;

ThermoFisher) for 90 minutes at 45 °C and 100-mTorr and stored at -80°C until LC-MS/MS

acquisition.

**Liquid chromatography–tandem mass spectrometry (LC-MS/MS)**

Peptides were resuspended in 4% acetonitrile (ACN) with 0.1% formic acid (FA) at a

concentration of 1μg/μL. Peptides were separated by a Dionex Ultimate 3000 UHPLC system

(ThermoFisher) tandem with a Q-Exactive Plus Hybrid Quadrupole-Orbitrap Mass Spectrometer

(ThermoFisher) with Xcalibur software (v. 3.0.63) for data acquisition in positive mode. Peptides

were separated on a C18 Acclaim PepMap nanoLC column (75 μm x 50 cm nanoViper, PN

164942, ThermoFisher) equilibrated with 4% solvent B (99.9% acetonitrile, 0.1% formic acid)

and 96% solvent A (99.9% H2O, 0.1% formic acid) kept at 55°C throughout the entire

acquisition. One microliter of peptides was loaded onto the column for 15-minutes at a flow rate

of 0.5 μL/min and eluted with a multi-step gradient. The flow rate was reduced to 0.3μL/min over

the course of 15 min, and solvent B was set to 20% over 100-minutes, then increased to 32%

and maintained for 20-minutes before increasing to 95% over 1-minute. The column was

washed with 95% solvent B at a flow rate of 0.4 µL/min for 4-minutes to remove/clean any

remaining peptides. The column was then re-equilibrated with 4% solvent B at 0.5µL/min until a

180-minutes total runtime. Blank injections were added after each biological replicate, using a

60-minute two sawtooth gradient from 4-95% solvent B, and column re-equilibration at 4%

solvent B. The mass spectrometer was set to top10 data-dependent acquisition (DDA), with a

scan range of 375 to 1500 m/z and a full MS resolution of 70,000; AGC target 3e6. Ions were

fragmented with NCE at 27 and collected with an AGC target of 1e5 at 17,500 resolution, 2 m/z

isolation window, maximum IT of 60 ms. Charged exclusion ions were unassigned, 1, 6–8, and

>8 charges.

**Bioinformatics data analysis**

After proteomics analysis, Proteome Discover (PD) 2.5.0.400 (ThermoFisher) was utilized to

identify the proteins from each peptide mixture. The database for Danio rerio was downloaded

from UniProtKB; http://www.uniprot.org/ on 21 October 2021 with a database 61,623

sequences. A contaminant dataset was run in parallel composed of trypsin autolysis fragments,

keratins, standards found in CRAPome repository and in-house contaminants. PD analysis

parameters are as follows: false-discovery rate (FDR) of 1%, HCD MS/MS, fully tryptic peptides

only, up to 2 missed cleavages, parent-ion mass of 10 ppm (monoisotopic); fragment mass

tolerance of 0.6 Da (in Sequest) and 0.02 Da (in PD 2.1.1.21) (monoisotopic). Two-high

confidence peptides per protein were applied for identifications. PD dataset was processed

through Scaffold Q+S 5.0.1. Scaffold (Proteome Software, Inc., Portland, OR 97219, USA) was

used to probabilistically validate protein identifications derived from MS/MS sequencing results

using the X!Tandem and Protein Prophet. Data was transferred to Scaffold LFQ (Proteome

Software, Portland, Oregon, USA) which was used to validate and statistically compare protein

identifications derived from MS/MS search results. A protein threshold of 95%, peptide threshold

of 95%, and a minimum number of 2 peptides were used for protein validation. Normalized

weighted spectral counts were used when comparing the samples. To ascertain p-values,

Fisher's Exact was run with a control FDR level q * .05 with standard Benjamini-Hochberg

correction. The mass spectrometry proteomics data have been deposited to the

ProteomeXchange Consortium via the PRIDE partner repository with the dataset identifier

PXD045670 and 10.6019/PXD045670.

**Results**

**The *sa43718* allele is embryonic lethal.**

The sa43718 allele results in a single base pair substitution in exon 6, which is predicted to

result in a premature stop codon (Fig 1A). Exon 6 encodes part of the extracellular domain.

Based on the sequence change present in the sa43718 allele, we developed a restriction

enzyme based genotyping strategy. The sa43718 allele abolishes an XhoI cleavage site and

therefore cannot be cleaved by XhoI in a restriction digest. We performed PCR amplification

using primers that flank the substituted nucleotide and used restriction digest to identify

wildtype, heterozygous, and homozygous larvae. DNA from wildtype siblings was completely

digested as predicted (Fig 1B, lane 2), while DNA from homozygous larvae was completely

undigested, and DNA from heterozygous carriers was partially digested (Fig 1B, lane 4 and 3,

respectively). Homozygous carriers of the sa43718 allele expressed reduced levels of *gabra1*

mRNA transcript relative to wildtype siblings (Fig 1C, p<0.05), which was associated with early

lethality. No homozygous larvae survived beyond 22 DPF (Fig 1D). These data correspond with

mRNA and survival data previously published by Samarut and colleagues using a different

nonsense allele [17].

**Mutation of *gabra1* results in hypermotility.**

We have previously reported hypoactivity at 5 DPF upon knockdown of *gabra1* [2]. In contrast,

seizure-like behavior at early and juvenile stages has been reported in a zebrafish model of

*gabra1* loss of function [17]. To begin to rectify these differences, we monitored swimming

behavior after a light stimulus, using a similar approach as Samarut and colleagues [17]. We

measured baseline activity for a period of 5 minutes in the dark after a 1-hour acclimation

period. During this time, we did not observe any differences in baseline swimming patterns

according to total distance swam (mm) or swim speed (mm/s) in the sa43718 allele (Fig 2A&A').

However, after light stimulus, we detected a marked increase in swim speed in the *sa43718*

allele (Fig 2A&A'). Swim patterns were increased in mutant larvae during the entire light

stimulus (Fig 2C&C'). Importantly, increased speed (velocity) was associated with rapid circling

behavior, hyperactivity burst, and whirlpool behavior (Fig 2B) indicative of a seizure-like

behavior as defined by the zebrafish behavioral glossary [19]. Because we did not observe

behavioral changes in heterozygous carriers in comparison to wildtype siblings all data shown

here are from sibling wildtype or homozygous carriers of the *sa43718* allele. Following the initial

burst movement, homozygous larvae have a decrease in speed which normalizes with that of

sibling wildtype (Fig S1). Interestingly, because the larvae reduce speed from 660 seconds

onward, they respond to a second light stimulus at a similar magnitude of speed as observed in

the first light stimulus, with a maximum speed of 10mm/s (900-960 seconds) in each light

stimulus (Fig S1).

**Nonsense mutation of Gabra1 does not preclude response to PTZ.**

We have previously demonstrated that morpholino mediated knockdown of *gabra1* does not

prohibit receptor responses to PTZ, a $GABA_AR$ antagonist [2]. Therefore, we tested the ability of

homozygous carriers of the *sa43718* allele to respond to PTZ. As shown in Fig 3A, treatment

with PTZ induces increased swimming distance and speed in wildtype larvae. Within the first

five minutes post treatment, in dark conditions, wildtype larvae exhibit an average 2-fold change

in total distance swam and a 1.54-fold change in swim speed (Fig 3C and D; gray bars in the

dark). The sa43718 allele responded to PTZ but had a blunted response relative to wildtype

siblings. For example, the response to PTZ in dark conditions (Fig 3C-D: red bars in dark

conditions compared with gray bars). We continued to monitor the speed and distance swam

after light stimulus in PTZ treated larvae, both wildtype and homozygous mutants. After light

stimulus, wildtype sibling larvae showed a 1.5-fold change in average swim speed and a 2.5-

fold change in average total distance swam (Fig 3C-D; light conditions gray bars). In contrast,

the sa43718 allele exhibited a 1.4-fold change in average swim speed and 1.7-fold change in

average distance swam in response to PTZ treatment, neither was statistically significant (Fig

3C-D). The reduced response to PTZ treatment by the sa43718 allele was statistically

significant in dark conditions for speed (p=0.03) and distance (p=0.002) indicating a blunted

response.

**Expression of GABA$_A$ receptor subunits in the sa43718 allele.**

Previous studies suggest that mutation of *Gabra1* in mice [13] and zebrafish [2,17] results in

abnormal expression of other subunits of the GABA$_A$R. Thus, we hypothesized that the

expression of other GABA$_A$R receptor subunits were disrupted in the *sa43718* allele. We first

measured the expression of β2 and γ2 subunits, as these are present in the most common form

of the GABA$_A$R receptor, alongside α1. We did not observe abnormal expression of the

transcripts encoding either the β2 or γ2 subunits (Fig 4A). Consequently, we hypothesized that

a version of the GABA$_A$R receptor is being produced. We next measured the expression levels

of α2-6. We observed a statistically significant decrease in α2, α3, and α5, however, the

decrease was not more than 2-fold in any case (Figure 4A).

**Proteomic analysis identifies differentially expressed proteins (DEPs) in the *sa43718***

**allele.**

We uncovered normal expression of β2 and γ2 transcript levels with mild to moderate

changes in the expression of other α subunits. We next hypothesized that these changes in

expression are associated with abnormal inhibitory network development, which was previously

described. To begin to investigate this hypothesis, we isolated protein from whole brain

homogenates and performed proteomics analysis. A total of 3500 proteins were identified in the

wildtype sibling brain homogenate, 3511 were identified in heterozygous animals, and 3552

were identified in the homozygous carriers of the sa43718 allele. A complete list of identified

proteins is in S1 file. From these proteins, we identified a total of 173 DEPs in homozygous

mutants relative to wildtype clutch mates. Of these 81 were up-regulated and 93 were down-

regulated. A complete list of DEPs can be found in file S2. DEPs of interest include

Synaptotagmin, Complexin 4a, Dynactin subunit 1, Dynamin GTPase, Secretogranin II, and a

Vat1 homolog. Each of these proteins has a function in synaptic fusion, transport, exocytosis,

endocytosis, or direct interactions with small synaptic vesicles. Interestingly, we also noted a

significant number of DEPs involved in microtubule growth, microtubule binding, vesicle

recycling, retrograde transport along microtubules, or microtubule folding. These include

microtubule associated protein, RP/EB family member 3b, Dynactin subunit 1, Dynamin

GTPase, and Tubulin-specific chaperone A.

We further annotated DEPs by biological process (Fig 4B), molecular function (Fig 4C),

and cellular process (Fig 4D). According to biological process, DEPs were clustered in Gene

Ontology (GO) groups associated with proton transport including sodium and potassium export

across the plasma membrane. Some examples of DEPs in this category include Slc82b,

Atp1a1b, Atp1b3a, and Atp1a1a.3. All these DEPs are important for sodium and potassium

homeostasis consistent with GO analysis. GO analysis by molecular function also indicated

molecular carrier activity and active transport mechanisms, consistent with the GO analysis

according to biological process. GO analysis by cellular process indicated DEPs in the

respiratory chain, mitochondrial protein containing complexes, the cytoskeleton, proton

transport, and exocytosis. These data collectively indicate mitochondrial transport, synaptic

vesicle regulation, and proton homeostasis are dysregulated after mutation of Gabra1.

**Discussion**

The GABA$_A$R has previously been associated with seizure and epileptic phenotypes

[1,9,16]. In support of this notion, we previously reported a heterozygous missense mutation in

humans that is associated with a seizure phenotypes [2], which has subsequently been shown to

be a loss of function allele [12]. Multiple model systems have been developed to study early

*GABRA1* function. These include mouse and zebrafish models. Survival of homozygous

knockouts in mice and zebrafish is compromised [13,17]. Due to external fertilization and early

juvenile survival of homozygous mutants, zebrafish provide a window of opportunity to analyze

developmental and juvenile onset of seizures [20–25]. However, in previous studies germline

nonsense mutation of zebrafish *gabra1* and morpholino mediated knockdown of *gabra1*

demonstrated different behavioral phenotypes after a light stimulus [2,17]. Here we characterized

the phenotypes of a novel allele, known as the *sa43718* allele. The *sa43718* allele is a single

base pair change in exon 6, which results in a premature stop codon and leads to a decrease in

*gabra1* expression. The *sa43718* allele reduces viability and homozygous mutants die by 22

DPF. This is consistent with the viability of other zebrafish [17] and mouse models [14].

We observed seizure like (hypermotility, whirlpool behavior) behavior upon light stimulus

in the *sa43718* allele. These data are supported by previously published works, which

established seizure like behavior at the juvenile stage in a zebrafish germline nonsense mutant

[17]. Similar results have also been documented in mouse models of *Gabra1* mutation, although

these data are sex and strain specific [13–15]. In our experiments, the zebrafish larvae have not yet

determined sex and therefore, sex is not a variable considered in our experiments. Hyperactivity

and seizure like behavior in the *sa43718* allele contrasts with our previous study using

morpholino mediated knockdown [2] but validates findings from others using another nonsense

allele. Morpholinos are known to have off-target effects [26], however our previous study found

hypomotility using two independent morpholinos.  It is a strong possibility that dosage, timing,

and level of knockdown could play a role in the interpretation of these results. Nonetheless, our

analysis of *sa43718* provides strong evidence, particularly when collectively considered with

data from Samarut and colleagues, that nonsense mutation of *gabra1* is lethal and is associated

with the early onset of seizure like behavior.

Previous studies also demonstrated that the overall brain morphology of *gabra1* mutant

brains was normal. This is consistent with functional analysis of the p.T292I patient variant we

discovered. Chen and colleagues established that the pT292I variant can produce a receptor in

HEK293 cells, but reduces channel open time [12]. Interestingly and despite a normal

morphology, Samarut and colleagues showed 460 differentially expressed genes in *gabra1*

mutant brains. Of these genes, 3 GABA$_A$R subunits, in addition to *gabra1*, were down regulated

[17]. Consistent with these data, we observed reduced expression of other α subunits, specifically

α2, α3, and α5. However, none of the α subunits were reduced more than 50%, suggesting that

some transcripts are produced and could be incorporated into the GABA$_A$R. Incorporation of

these subunits, albeit at a lower level, is likely underlying the ability to respond to PTZ that we

observed in homozygous mutants.

Though the *sa43718* allele responded to PTZ the overall response was blunted relative

to wildtype siblings and the transcript levels of other α subunits was mildly reduced so we

hypothesized the loss of *gabra1* caused abnormal development of the inhibitory system.

Therefore, we performed proteomics analysis to determine if the behavioral effects are

associated with differential protein expression of proteins required for synapse development.

We did not identify a single GABA$_A$R subunit differentially expressed in the *sa43718* allele at the

protein level. This is attributed to low overall protein expression in the brain homogenate and

detection. Therefore, we focused our analysis on proteins that were abundantly and consistently

detected in technical (3) and biological replicates (2). We identified proteins with functions in

synaptic vesicle transport, microtubule organization/growth, mitochondrial function, and

regulation of potassium and sodium homeostasis as differentially expressed. These biological

categories are consistent with data from Samarut and colleagues, who noted abnormal mRNA

expression of genes in neuronal function and mitochondrial function, among others [17]. However,

we did not detect a high percentage of overlapping genes and proteins between our two studies,

though biological processes did overlap, with significant emphasis on synaptic vesicles, synaptic

function, and the mitochondria. Of note, we identified abnormal expression of synaptotagmin,

secretogranin II, and synapsin IIb; all of which are important for synaptic vesicle release at the

presynaptic membrane. Synapsin I was also downregulated and has been associated with

epileptic phenotypes [27–30]. Furthermore, we identified downregulation of proteins implicated in

mitochondrial complex I deficiency, including NADH:ubiquinone oxidoreductase core subunit S2

and NADH:ubiquinone oxidoreductase core subunit A10. Remarkably, mutations in the genes

encoding these proteins are associated with Leigh syndrome, one of the most common

mitochondrial diseases, in which epilepsy is a primary phenotype [31,32]. Interestingly, mutation of

*GABRA1* in humans was prematurely diagnosed as a primary mitochondrial disorder prior to

exome sequencing [24].

Here we have characterized an additional germline mutant of the zebrafish *gabra1* gene.

We observed early lethality, seizure-like hypermotility after light stimuli, and abnormal

expression of proteins involved in vesicle transport, synaptic vesicle release, exocytosis, and

endocytosis. Our data support the hypermotility and abnormal development of inhibitory

synapses described previously in a zebrafish nonsense mutant [17]. Collectively, these data

suggest that models derived from germline mutation of *gabra1* rather than transient knockdown

are more physiologically relevant.

**Limitations of the study**

The present study characterizes the *sa43718* allele. However, due to the lack of antibodies, we

were unable to detect Gabra1 protein in zebrafish and we could not validate the decrease of

Gabra1 using proteomics due to low detection levels. None of the subunits were consistently

detected by proteomics or western blot. Thus our study relies on mRNA validation of *gabra1*

expression and sequencing to confirm the mutation of interest. While the mutation can be

confirmed using Sanger sequencing there still exists the potential for off-target effects. However,

our analysis recapitulates and validates previous studies in zebrafish with a germline mutant of

*gabra1*.

**Figure Legends**

**Fig 1.  The *sa43718* allele carries a single nonsense mutation in the *gabra1* gene.** (A)

Schematic representation of the *gabra* $^{sa43718}$ allele. Homozygous individuals of the *sa43718*

allele (*gabra1* $^{sa43718/sa43718}$) carry a single base pair substitution (C>T) in the *gabra1* gene

(ENSDART0000010000), predicted to result in a premature stop. Schematic of exon structure of

the *gabra1* gene, not to scale. The *sa43718* site is indicated with a red asterisk within exon 6,

which encodes the extracellular domain of Gabra1. (B) Restriction enzyme digest gel showing

digestion of PCR fragments of genomic *gabra1.* The *sa43718* allele abolishes the Xhol

recognition site. Therefore, digestion of homozygous (sa43718/sa43718) sample results in an

uncut fragment, whereas digestion of wildtype (sibling) sample results in a fully digested

fragment. LDR: 1kb plus ladder. (C) Quantitative PCR (qPCR) analysis of the relative

expression of *gabra1* in sibling wildtype and homozygous carriers of the *sa43718* allele. Error

bars represent the standard error of the mean of biological triplicates. T-test was used to detect

statistical significance and *$p<0.05$. (D) The offspring of *gabra1* $^{sa43718/+}$ fish was genotyped by

tail-clipping at 3 days post fertilization (DPF). Larvae were raised separately according to their

genotypes (sibling n=11, sa43718/+ n=13, sa43718/sa43718 n=14), and their survival was

monitored until day 22. Premature death of homozygous carriers of the *sa43718* allele

(sa43718/sa43718*)* was observed starting at day 7 post fertilization, when compared to the

wildtype (sibling) and heterozygous (sa43718*/+)* siblings*.*

**Fig 2. *gabra1*^sa43718/sa43718 larvae undergo seizure-like behavior upon light stimuli.** (A & A')

Behavioral analysis of *sa43718* allele and wildtype siblings at 5 days post fertilization. (A) Swim

speed (mm/s) over 15 minutes (900 seconds) in dark-light-dark transitions [5 minutes (0-300

seconds) in the dark, 5 minutes (300-600 seconds) in the light, and 5 minutes (600-900

seconds) in the dark) was analyzed using the Zebrabox technology. Data was collected every

minute (60 seconds). *gabra1*^sa43718/sa43718 larvae undergo hyperlocomotion upon light stimuli

when compared to their wildtype siblings (Sibling). *p<0.05. (A') Total distance swam over 15

minutes in dark-light-dark transitions. Homozygous carriers (sa43718/sa43718) larvae showed

increased distance swam across the light phase, showing a statistically significant increase at

seconds 480-540 (minute 9), when compared to their wildtype counterparts (sibling).

*gabra1*^sa43718/sa43718 larvae then show decreased distance swam under dark conditions (600-

660s) when compared to their wildtype siblings (sibling) *p<0.05. (B) Representative images of

swimming track of a single larvae, representing each genotype, generated from the Viewpoint

Zebralab Tracking software in dark (180-240s), light (480-540s), and dark (600-660s)

conditions. Green lines indicate movements between 4-8mm/s and red lines indicate burst

movements (>8mm/s). (C) Average total speed representing overall behavioral responses in

dark-light-dark conditions of *gabra1* wildtype (sibling) and homozygous (sa43718/sa43718)

larvae. Homozygous carriers (sa43718/sa43718) showed increased average swim speed in

light conditions when compared to their wildtype (sibling) counterparts. (C') Average total

distance swam representing overall behavioral responses in dark-light-dark conditions of *gabra1*

wildtype (sibling) and homozygous (sa43718/sa43718) larvae. No statistically significant

changes were observed in homozygous larvae (sa43718/sa43718) when compared to their

wildtype siblings for average distance measurements. All behavioral analysis was performed

using a minimum of 30 larvae per biological replicate, over three independent biological

replicates. Representative analysis of a single biological replicate is shown here. Sibling (n=13)

and *gabra1*$^{sa43718/sa43718}$ (n=26).

**Fig 3. Locomotion response to pentylenetetrazole (PTZ) in the *sa43718* allele.** (A-B).

Behavioral responses of the *sa43718* allele at 5 days post fertilization (DPF) were analyzed

using the Zebrabox. (A) Comparison of wildtype sibling (Sibling) larvae response to treatment

with 10uM PTZ (10uM PTZ) or no treatment (NO PTZ) at 5 days post fertilization. NO PTZ

n=18, 10uM PTZ n=16. *p<0.05 (B) Comparison of homozygous carriers (sa43718/sa43718)

response to treatment with 10uM PTZ (10uM PTZ) or no treatment (NO PTZ) at 5 days post

fertilization. NO PTZ n=13, 10uM PTZ n=14. *p<0.05. Swim speed (mm/s) was analyzed using

the distance swam and swimming duration data generated by ViewPoint software. Larvae were

monitored for 5 minutes in the dark (0-300 s), 5 minutes in the light (300-600 s), and 5 minutes

in the dark (600-900 s). Data was collected every minute (60 s). Error bars represent the

standard error of the mean. (C) Average fold change (total distance) response to treatment with

PTZ in dark (0-300s) and light (300-600s) conditions by wildtype (sibling) and sa43718/sa43718

mutants. *p=0.002. (D) Average fold change (swim speed) response to treatment with PTZ in

dark (0-300s) and light (300-600s) conditions by wildtype (sibling) and sa43718/sa43718

mutants. *p=0.03. Error bars represent standard deviation in C-D.

**Fig 4. Differential Gene and Protein Expression of *sa43718* allele carriers.** (A) Relative

expression of major subunits of the GABA$_A$R. *gabra2a* (α2), *gabra3* (α3), *gabra4* (α4), *gabra5*

(α5), *gabra6a* (α6a), *gabrb2* (β2), and *gabrg2* (γ2) were analyzed in wildtype siblings (sibling)

and homozygous (sa43718/sa43718) mutants. Graph represents the mean relative mRNA

expression obtained from 3 biological replicates each with a pool of N=10-12 larvae per group. *

p<0.05 Errors bars represent standard error of the mean from biological replicates. (B-D) Gene

Ontology terms enriched by proteins with significant expression (p-value <0.05) between

wildtype sibling and *sa43718* homozygous mutant larvae at 5 days post fertilization. Terms are

separated by (B) Biological Process, (C) Molecular Function, (D) Cellular Process.

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## Supporting information

**S1 File. Complete list of identified proteins.**

**S2 File. Complete list of differentially expressed proteins.**

**S3 File. Supplemental figure and figure legend.**

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## Author contributions

DP analyzed data, performed RNA analysis, qPCR, protein analysis (western blots not included due to low cross reactivity of antibodies), confirmatory and validatory experiments. NGR performed experiments, provided experimental conceptualization, wrote aspects of the manuscript, performed zebrafish care and maintenance, supervised trainees that provided input/data analysis or acquisition. AMQ performed data analysis, wrote portions of the manuscript, obtained funding, provided mentorship to NGR, and performed data analysis. BEP performed validatory analysis of behavior phenotypes. IP performed survival analysis and produced graphs related to survival. BG, ILE, and CCE performed mass spectrometry, protein isolation, and data analysis for proteomics. CG and AG performed critical genotyping and

analysis to complete the manuscript and VLC provided optimized protocol for protein isolation

and data analysis.

**Data availability**

All data and reagents are available upon request from the corresponding author.

**Competing interests**

Authors declare no competing or financial interests.

**A**

Wildtype sibling: GTTTGGACTCGAGGGGCGGCG
*gabra1^sa43718/sa43718*: GTTTGGACTTGAGGGGCGGCG