Proteomics of Patient-derived Breast Tumours Identifies a Pro-migratory

Osteomodulin-Cyclin Dependent Kinase 1 Axis which Drives Bone Metastasis

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Abstract

Breast cancer remains a leading cause of mortality, predominantly due to the development

of metastases to vital organs. At present, predictive biomarkers of organ specific metastasis

and therapies targeted to the metastatic niche are limited. Here, to identify the molecular

determinants of breast cancer metastasis we analysed patient-derived breast tumours by

combining quantitative proteomics, bioinformatics, and functional assays *in vitro* and *in vivo.*

We identified elevated levels of the protein Osteomodulin (OMD) associated with breast

cancer bone metastases in patient-derived samples. OMD overexpression in the breast

cancer MDA-MB-231 cell model significantly increases cell migration *in vitro* and promotes

the formation of bone metastases *in vivo.* Phosphoproteomics analysis of MDA-MB-231 cells

expressing OMD identifies active Cyclin-dependent kinase 1 (CDK1) downstream of OMD.

The importance of the OMD-CDK1 axis was validated using two independent

phosphoproteomics datasets analysing patient-derived breast cancer samples. We also

show that the OMD-CDK1 axis drives cell migration and cell viability *in vitro* and the

formation of bone metastases *in vivo.* Finally, CDK1 inhibition reduces *in vitro* cell viability of

an independent cohort of metastatic patient samples showing high CDK1 activity. Therefore, the OMD-CDK1 axis will determine which breast cancer patients develop bone metastases and is a therapeutic target to treat or prevent breast cancer bone metastases.

Introduction

Metastases are responsible for 90% of breast cancer deaths (1) and are most commonly found in the bone, brain, liver and lungs of breast cancer patients (2). Although different drivers depending on the metastatic organ have been identified (3), there are currently neither clinically available biomarkers nor targeted drug therapies against organ-specific metastases in breast cancer. For instance, preventing bone metastasis or targeting of bone organotropic drivers would greatly benefit patients given the capacity of the bone microenvironment to condition tumour cells to colonise other organs (4). Currently, radiologically detected, or symptomatic bone metastases are managed with bisphosphonates and Receptor Activator of NFκB Ligand (RANKL) inhibitors (4). However, there is still the need to discover more specific biomarkers and actionable combinations of therapeutic targets for patients who may develop metastasis to the bone and other organs.

Omics technologies have nowadays the capacity to provide novel biomarkers and therapeutic targets from a variety of samples, including patient-derived samples (5). For instance, genomic analysis of metastatic breast cancer patient samples or matched primary and metastatic breast cancer patient samples identified several potential therapeutic targets whose mutation was enriched in metastases (6). Also transcriptomic analysis of breast cancer primary and metastatic samples identified several transcripts dysregulated in breast cancer bone metastases compared to other metastatic sites (7). In contrast to genomics and transcriptomics, proteomics and phosphoproteomics have so far analysed primary breast cancer but not metastatic samples (8), for example identifying dysregulation in tumour cells metabolism (9), novel kinases in triple negative breast cancer patients (10), and signalling

pathways associated with Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor 2 (HER2)-targeted therapy

resistance (11).

Here, to identify potential therapeutic targets and their biomarkers in breast cancer

metastasis organotropism we analysed fresh frozen primary breast cancer resection

samples that were clinically annotated as to the presence or absence of organ-specific

metastases within 5 years of diagnosis. We combined mass spectrometry-based proteomics

and phosphoproteomics, bioinformatics, and functional assays *in vitro* and *in vivo*. We

identified the Osteomodulin (OMD)-Cyclin Dependent Kinase (CDK1) axis to be

dysregulated in primary breast cancer samples associated with bone metastasis and

validated the pro-migratory and pro-metastatic role of the OMD/CDK1 axis in breast cancer

models and independent cohorts of patient-derived samples. Thus, our omics approach

identifies a novel mechanism promoting breast cancer bone metastases.

Material and methods

Reagents

A detailed list can be found in Additional File 1.

Cell Culture

All cells were authenticated using short tandem repeat analysis of 21 markers by Eurofins

Genomics and Cancer Research UK Manchester Institute Molecular Biology Core Facility in

2021 and 2022. Cells were tested monthly for mycoplasma with a PCR-based detection

assay (VenorGeM-Cambio). MDA-MB-231 breast cancer cells were a gift from J. Massague

(12). HMFU19 and 544R Cancer-Associated Fibroblasts (CAFs) (13, 14) were a gift from C.

Kirwan, University of Manchester. HFOB 1.19 were purchased from ATCC (CRL-11372).

RAW264.7 cells (15) were a gift from P. Ottewell, University of Sheffield. MDA-MB-231,

544R CAFs, Lenti X cells (gift from A. Hurlstone, University of Manchester), and RAW 264.7

cells were grown in DMEM supplemented with 10% Fetal Calf Serum (FCS), 1% Penicillin-

Streptomycin (Pen-Strep) (100U/ml penicillin, 100ug/ml streptomycin) and 1mM Sodium

Pyruvate. HFOB 1.19 cells were grown in DMEM-F12 supplemented with 10% FCS and 1%

Pen-Strep. HMFU19 cells were grown in RPMI supplemented with 10% FCS, 1% Pen-Strep

and 2mM L-Glutamine. RAW264.7 cells were differentiated by treatment with 100ng/ml

recombinant human RANKL for 8 days (16). HFOB 1.19 cells were differentiated by 7 days

of culture at 39.5^{o}C with undifferentiated cells being grown at 34°C (17). All cells were grown

in humidified 5% CO_2 incubators. To create MDA MB 231 cells or MDA MB 231 bone variant

cells expressing osteomodulin (PAO, BOO) or the mApple control (PAM, BOM), a pCDH1-

Ef1-MCS-T2A-mApple vector (18) was used. The pCDH1 vector and either the mApple

amplified gene with a stop codon or an osteomodulin encoding gene string (ThermoFisher)

were cleaved with NotI and NheI restriction enzymes and then ligated using a T4 ligase

overnight. LentiXL cells at 70% confluency were transfected with Fugene, plasmid and viral

packaging proteins pMDL, VSVG and Rev following standard protocols. Lentivirally

transfected cells were sorted using fluorescence activated cell sorting (BD FACSAria III

Fusion Cell Sorter) to have similar expression of mApple.

Sample Preparation and Analysis for Mass Spectrometry-based Proteomics and

Phosphoproteomics and Data Analysis

A detailed protocol can be found in the Supplementary Materials and Methods (18).

In vivo Experiments

All *in vivo* experiments were performed in accordance with the UK Home Office Animals

(Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 under project license PCFEAC0D4 and study protocols

were approved by the CRUK Manchester Institute Animal Welfare and Ethical Research

Board (AWERB). 100,000 PAM, PAO, or BOM cells in 50µl PBS were injected into the left

cardiac ventricle of 4 athymic nude mice (sourced from Envigo) per condition using a 28-

gauge needle. Mice were monitored for 25 days before culling. For CDK1 inhibition studies,

4 days after intracardiac injection of 100,000 PAO cells, 4 athymic nude mice were dosed

with 225ul of RO-3306 solution (final concentration 4mg/kg, SeleckChem) dissolved in 40%

PEG300-1% Tween80-3% DMSO in ddH$_2$O given 3 times per week by oral gavage and

compared to 4 vehicle control mice. Mice were culled 25 days after intracardiac injection of

breast cancer cells. Lungs (only for the first study) and one femur were formalin-fixed for

immunohistochemical analysis, and one femur was collected in DMEM with FCS, 10% Pen-

Strep and 1mM Sodium pyruvate and bones were flushed. To flush bones, the ends of

mouse femurs were clipped using scissors and ground down and the bone marrow was

flushed using 5mL complete DMEM using a 25-gauge needle. The ground bone ends and

bone marrow were filtered through a 100μm filter which was washed with 5mL complete

DMEM. Filtered bone cells were pelleted by centrifugation at 600xg at 4°C before filtering

through a 40μm filter.

Immunohistochemistry

A detailed protocol can be found in Additional File 1.

Biochemical Assays

Detailed protocols for quantitative RT-PCR, cell lysis and immunoblotting, EdU incorporation

assay, collagen contractility assay, Boyden chamber invasion assay, scratch wound cell

migration assay, mammosphere assays, alkaline phosphatase activity assay, alizarin red

staining, bone resorption assay, Alamar blue cell viability assay can be found in Additional

File 1.

Statistics

Experiments were performed in at least three independent biological triplicates. One-way

ANOVAs with Dunnett's multiple comparisons test were used to determine significance

between 3 or more experimental conditions. Student's t tests were used to determine

significance between two experimental conditions.

Results

Proteomic Analysis of Primary Breast Cancer Samples Identifies Dysregulation of Osteomodulin (OMD) in Patients Developing Bone Metastases

To identify changes in proteins and phosphorylated proteins underlying breast cancer metastasis, we analysed a cohort of 39 primary breast cancer patient samples, of which 21 developed metastases within 5 years of diagnosis (metastatic) while 18 did not (non-metastatic), by label-free mass spectrometry-based proteomics and phosphoproteomics (Fig. 1A, Additional Files 2-4). Of the 39 patient samples, 21 were from patients who had hormone receptor positive (HR+) tumours, 9 who had human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 positive (HER2+) tumours and 9 who had triple negative (TN) tumours. Our patient cohort included patients who developed metastases at all four of the main metastatic sites in breast cancer at 5 years post-diagnosis (bone, brain, liver and lung) (2), thus providing a unique dataset (Fig. 1A, Additional File 2). We identified and quantified a total of 6293 proteins (5106 in non-metastatic samples and 5741 in metastatic samples) and 14281 phosphorylated sites (11148 in non-metastatic samples and 13186 in metastatic samples) (Supplemental Fig. 1A-B, Additional Files 3-4). Pearson correlation for technical replicates in the proteomics data was above 0.95 on average and was above 0.6 on average in the phosphoproteomics data (Supplemental Fig. 1C-D), thus showing high correlation. Across phosphorylated sites, 62.8% were singly phosphorylated, 29.0% were doubly phosphorylated and 7.2% were more than doubly phosphorylated and the residue distribution across serine, threonine and tyrosine was 88.24%, 10.92%, 0.83%, respectively with a median score for phosphorylated peptides of 172 (Supplemental Fig. 1E-G). Therefore, the quality of our proteomics and phosphoproteomics analysis was consistent with previous publications (8, 18).

We focused on proteins and phosphorylated sites present in at least 80% of either non-metastatic or metastatic samples for further analysis (Additional Files 5-6). Differential expression analysis of patients who developed or did not develop metastases identified 33 differentially regulated proteins and 156 differentially regulated phosphorylated sites on 122

proteins (p value <0.05, Log2 Fold Change in intensity >1.5) (Fig. 1B-C, Additional Files 5-6). To determine whether these differentially regulated proteins and phosphorylated sites had previously been associated with breast cancer metastasis, we compared our list of 33 dysregulated proteins and 156 dysregulated phosphorylated sites with an in-house curated database of metastasis-associated genes and proteins obtained by searching PubMed with the term "Breast Cancer Metastasis" for a total of 2472 entries (Additional File 7). We found that ADIRF, CMA1, COL11A1, COL4A1, CTHRC1, MXRA5, OGN, OMD, SNCG, SYNM, TNC proteins and BAD, MAPK1 (2 sites), PGRMC1 (2 sites), STMN1, EIF4B and VIM phosphorylated sites have been previously associated with breast cancer metastasis or metastasis-promoting phenotypes (Fig. 1B-C, Additional Files 5-7). Thus, our proteomics and phosphoproteomics analysis identified both known and novel drivers of breast cancer metastasis.

Next, KEGG and GO biological processes enrichment analysis identified several processes enriched among the upregulated proteins and phosphoproteins, including collagen remodelling, previously associated with breast cancer (19) (Fig. 1D, Additional File 8). Among the upregulated proteins and phosphorylated sites associated with collagen synthesis and remodelling, the member of the small leucine-rich repeat protein family Osteomodulin (OMD) (20) was the only one previously associated with bone tropism (7). Indeed, we found that OMD expression was significantly higher in patients who developed bone metastasis compared to patients who developed metastases in other sites (p value = 0.0012), or that did not develop metastases (p value = <0.0001) (Fig. 1E, Additional Files 2, 4). Consistent with the idea that OMD expression is associated with bone metastasis, we found that the expression of OMD mRNA was also significantly higher in bone metastases compared to other metastatic sites in independent breast (FDR adjusted p value = 0.00000364) (Fig. 1F) and prostate cancer GEO datasets (7, 21).

Overall, our proteomics analysis of primary breast cancer samples suggests that OMD expression is associated with breast cancer bone metastasis.

OMD Does Not Alter the Behaviour of Fibroblasts, Osteoblasts, or Osteoclasts Cell Models

To study how OMD may contribute towards bone metastasis, we assessed the localisation of OMD by immunohistochemistry on 25 of the 39 patient samples for which formalin-fixed paraffin-embedded (FFPE) sections were available (Additional File 2). We found that 17 samples stained positive for OMD showing heterogeneous OMD expression in the tumour, stromal and immune compartments (Supplemental Fig. 2). However, haemotoxylin and eosin (H&E) staining on these 25 sections evaluated by a pathologist showed that 20 out of 25 samples had >50% epithelial content with an overall average epithelial content of 66% (Additional File 2), indicating that our omics analyses were largely based on epithelial cancer cells. Based on these findings, we next tested whether OMD affected bone metastases through cells in the microenvironment or through the epithelial tumour cells themselves.

To verify this hypothesis, we used available cell models of the primary and secondary (bone) tumour microenvironment including normal and cancer-associated fibroblasts (HMFU19 and 544R, respectively) (13, 14), osteoblasts (HFOB 1.19) (17), and osteoclasts (RAW 264.7, post-differentiation with RANKL) (15). As a model of tumour epithelial cells, we used the epithelial breast cancer cell line MDA-MB-231 infected with lentivirus expressing either mApple as a control (PAM) or an OMD-T2A linker-mApple construct (PAO) (Fig. 2A-B). OMD expression was confirmed by immunoblotting in cell lysates from both starvation and complete media and in conditioned medium (Fig. 2A-B), thus confirming that OMD is a secreted protein (20). To study how OMD may affect the cells of the breast microenvironment, we tested whether OMD affects matrix remodelling, given the known role of OMD in collagen remodelling (22) and of fibroblasts and osteoblasts in remodelling the extracellular matrix in primary tumours (23). To mimic matrix remodelling we used a collagen contractility assay (24). We assessed the effect of conditioned medium from PAO (containing OMD) compared to conditioned medium from PAM as a control on the ability for collagen contractility of HMFU19, 544R, and differentiated HFOB 1.19 cells (Fig. 2C-E). To

mimic secreted OMD, we used recombinant OMD (rOMD) at increasing concentrations from

10ng/ml to 1µg/ml (22). Neither conditioned media nor rOMD significantly affected the

collagen remodelling capabilities of any tested cells (Fig. 2C-E). We next tested

osteogenesis, a key process in differentiation and turnover of bone tissues involved in

sclerotic metastases (25), by alkaline phosphatase assay (26) and calcium deposition,

crucial for osteosclerotic bone metastases (25), via Alizarin red assay (27). Both

osteogenesis and calcium deposition were significantly induced in the HFOB 1.19 osteoblast

cell models upon differentiation when grown at $39.5^{o}C$ (Fig. 2F-G, Supplemental Fig. 3A).

However, compared to differentiated HFOB 1.19 osteoblasts, neither alkaline phosphatase

activity nor Alizarin red assay by differentiated HFOB 1.19 were significantly altered by

conditioned medium from PAM or PAO or by increasing concentrations of rOMD, except for

the highest concentration of rOMD affecting only calcium deposition (Fig. 2F-G,

Supplemental Fig. 3A). Finally, we assessed the activity of osteoclasts, another key cell type

for breast cancer bone metastases (25), by determining the ability of an osteoclast cell

model (RAW 264.7 mouse monocytes) to create pores in the bone matrix, a process known

as bone resorption (25). RAW 264.7 cells were differentiated to osteoclasts using RANKL

treatment (16) and differentiation was assessed by quantitative RT-PCR expression of

OSCAR and CTSK genes, which are both markers of osteoclast differentiation (15)

(Supplemental Fig. 3B). No significant induction of osteoclast activity was seen upon

treatment of differentiated RAW 264.7 cells with either conditioned media from PAM or PAO

cells or rOMD was observed, as the number and size of pores was consistent across all

conditions (Fig. 2H-I, Supplemental Fig. 3C).

Taken together, these findings suggest that secreted OMD does not promote extracellular

matrix remodelling, only partially affects osteoblast activity, and does not play a role in bone

resorption and osteoclast activity in the tested experimental models of tumour

microenvironment.

OMD Increases Breast Cancer Cell Migration *in vitro* and Bone Metastasis *in vivo*

To address whether OMD expression affected the behaviour of epithelial breast cancer cells

we tested whether OMD expression affected extracellular matrix remodelling by a collagen

contractility assay and found that collagen remodelling was not affected by OMD expression

in our PAM vs PAO cell model (Fig. 2A-B, Supplemental Fig. 4A). Next, we assessed

whether OMD altered cell proliferation by measuring EdU incorporation and found no

significant effect of OMD expression on proliferation (Supplemental Fig. 4B). As OMD has

previously been associated with resistance to apoptosis (28), we also tested whether OMD

expression affected anoikis resistance and stemness of breast cancer cells through

mammosphere formation and mammosphere self-renewal assays. OMD expression showed

no significant effect on mammosphere formation or self-renewal (Supplemental Fig. 4C-D).

Finally, to assess the effects of OMD on cell motility through matrix we measured cell

invasion by a Boyden chamber assay with Matrigel-coated chambers and cell migration via a

scratch wound assay where proliferation was prevented by mitomycin pre-treatment (29).

Although invasion was not significantly altered between PAM and PAO cells in our

experimental conditions, OMD expression significantly increased cell migration (Fig. 3A-B,

Supplemental Fig. 4E). Also increasing concentrations of rOMD significantly increased PAM

cell migration (Fig. 3A-B). However, OMD expression did not affect cell motility of the bone-

tropic MDA-MB-231 cell line (12) (Fig. 3C-Supplemental Fig. 4F-G). Altogether, these

findings suggest that OMD has mainly a pro-migratory role in our model of breast cancer

epithelial cells.

Given the increased migratory capacity of PAO compared to PAM *in vitro* and on the

increased expression of OMD in patients who developed bone metastases compared to

patients who did not develop metastases or developed metastases in other organs (Fig. 1E

and 3A-B, Additional Files 3-5), we next assessed the metastatic potential of PAO and PAM

cells *in vivo*. We injected PAM, PAO, and BOM (positive control for bone metastases) cells

by intracardiac injection into four athymic nude mice and firstly counted the number of lung

metastatic lesions as a measure of their metastatic potential. We found no significant

differences in the metastatic potential of PAM, PAO, and BOM cells (Fig. 3E). However, the

number of cytokeratin 19 (CK19)-positive cells in bone flushes, which is an indicator of the

number of human epithelial cells in mouse bones (12), was significantly higher in both BOM

and PAO compared to PAM cells (Fig. 3F-G). This finding not only confirms the bone tropism

of BOM cells (12), but also supports a role for OMD in colonising the bones *in vivo*.

Overall, this data suggests that the pro-migratory function of OMD in breast cancer epithelial

cells may prime primary breast cancers for bone metastasis.

Phosphoproteomics Identifies an OMD-CDK1 axis Driving Cell Migration and Viability

in vitro **and** *in vivo*

To determine the mechanism underlying OMD-dependent cell migration *in vitro* and bone

colonisation *in vivo*, we analysed changes in the proteome and phosphoproteome of PAO

cells compared to PAM, BOM, and BOO cells as controls (Supplemental Fig. 5A). We

identified and quantified 3971 proteins and 9423 phosphorylated sites (Additional Files 9-

10). Pearson correlation between biological replicates of the proteomic and

phosphoproteomics data were consistently over 0.97 and 0.6 respectively (Supplemental

Fig. 5B-C). Across phosphorylated peptides, 41.9% were singly phosphorylated, 47.6% were

doubly phosphorylated, and 10.5% were more than doubly phosphorylated and the

distribution of phosphorylated site residue across serine, threonine and tyrosine was 85%,

11.3% and 3.7%, respectively indicating enrichment on tyrosine residues, with a median

phosphorylated peptide score of 182 (Supplemental Fig. 5D-F). All the quality controls were

in line with previous publications (8, 18). Differential expression analysis (P value <0.05,

Log2 Fold change >1) of these high-quality datasets did not identify significantly differentially

regulated proteins between PAO and PAM cells (Additional File 11) but did identify 53

differentially regulated phosphorylated sites, of which 18 were upregulated and 35 were

downregulated (Fig. 4A, Additional File 12). Of the 18 phosphorylated sites specifically

upregulated in PAO compared to PAM, only FOS like 1 (FOSL1) phosphorylated on serine

26 has a known cancer-associated function according to Phosphosite plus (30) and has

been shown to promote migration in MCF7breast cancer cells (31). Of the 35 downregulated

phosphorylated sites in PAO compared to PAM, 5 were also downregulated in BOO

compared to BOM, suggesting that these sites are unlikely associated with the PAO pro-

migratory signalling mechanism and thus they were excluded from further analysis

(Additional File 12). Of the remaining 30 phosphorylated sites specifically downregulated in

PAO compared to PAM cells, six had metastasis-associated functions, such as promoting

cell migration, invasion, or drug resistance according to Phosphosite plus (30) (Fig. 4A).

Only one of these 30 downregulated sites was associated with inactivation of protein activity:

Tyrosine 15 on the cell cycle regulator, Cyclin-dependent kinase 1 (CDK1, CDC2) (32) (Fig.

4A, Additional File 12). We confirmed the downregulation of Y15 on CDK1 in PAO compared

to PAM, BOO and BOM cells by quantified immunoblotting (Fig. 4B-C). Interestingly, we

found an inverse relationship between OMD expression and reduction of CDK1 inhibitory

phosphorylation in two independent phosphoproteomics datasets analysing breast cancer

patients (105 and 122 patients, respectively) (8, 33). These phosphoproteomics analyses

showed that CDK1 inhibitory phosphorylation at T14, Y15, and Y19 (32) was significantly

reduced in patients where OMD expression was above the mean compared to patients

where OMD expression was below the mean (Fig. 4D-E). Therefore, the OMD-CDK1 axis

may regulate the OMD-dependent phenotypes *in vitro* and *in vivo*.

To verify the role of CDK1 in cell migration we inhibited CDK1 using 10µM of the CDK1

inhibitor (CDK1i) RO-3306 (34) and assessed cell migration in the PAM and PAO model

system. Besides confirming that PAO cells migrate more than PAM cells, we found that PAO

but not PAM cell migration was significantly reduced upon treatment with 10µM RO-3306

(Fig. 5A). To test whether this reduction in migration was specifically downstream of CDK1,

we inhibited CDK4 and CDK6 with 10µM of the clinically relevant inhibitor Palbociclib

(CDK4,5i) and showed that CDK4/6 inhibition did not significantly reduce PAO cell migration

(Fig. 5B). Therefore, CDK1, but not CDK4-6, is specifically activated in PAO cells to regulate

cell migration *in vitro*. To test whether CDK1 inhibition also affected cell viability we

performed an Alamar blue assay (35) on the PAM and PAO cell model system. We found

that CDK1 inhibition significantly reduced the viability of PAO, but not PAM cells (Fig. 5C),

suggesting that enhanced CDK1 activity is required for sensitivity to CDK1 inhibition.

Since CDK1 regulate cell migration and viability in PAO cells, we next tested whether the

OMD-CDK1 axis regulated bone colonization *in vivo.* To do this, we performed intracardiac

injection of PAO cells into four athymic nude mice and tested whether inhibition of CDK1

affected the formation of bone metastasis. We detected numerous cytokeratin 19 (CK19)-

positive cells in bone flushes of mice treated with the vehicle control but almost no CK19-

positive cells in those treated with the CDK1 inhibitor RO-3306 (Fig. 5D-E). Therefore, this

data suggests a role for the OMD-CDK1 axis in colonising the bones *in vivo.*

Finally, we tested the clinical relevance of these findings using patient-derived breast cancer

cells acquired from metastatic pleural effusions and ascitic fluids (Additional File 13). We

assessed the effect of CDK1 activity on the viability of five metastatic patient-derived breast

cancers *in vitro.* We found that 4 of the 5 metastatic tumour samples had decreased cell

viability in response to CDK1 inhibition using the Alamar blue assay (Fig. 5F).

Phosphoproteomics and proteomics analysis of these samples produced a high-quality

dataset (Supplemental Fig. S6, Additional Files 14-15). Although we did not detect OMD in

the proteome dataset (Additional File 14), we identified downregulation of Y15 on CDK1 in

the four samples that responded to CDK1 inhibition (Fig. 5G, Additional File 15). Thus,

reduced CDK1 Y15 phosphorylation significantly correlated with reduced viability in

response to 10 μM RO-3306 treatment. Altogether, these data indicate the crucial role of

CDK1 activity downstream of OMD in regulating the viability of patient-derived breast cancer

samples.

In conclusion, we combined quantitative proteomics and phosphoproteomics from cancer

patients with bioinformatics analysis and functional assays *in vitro* and *in vivo* and showed

that OMD regulates cell migration, cell viability and bone metastatic capabilities through a

CDK1-dependent mechanism (Fig. 6).

Discussion

The yet unmet clinical need for novel biomarkers and targeted therapies to prevent and treat

breast cancer metastasis is demonstrated by the still very high number of deaths from breast

cancer each year of which 90% is caused by metastatic disease (2). Here, we combined

quantitative proteomics and phosphoproteomics from breast cancer patient-derived samples

and cell models with bioinformatics analysis and functional assays and found that the OMD-

CDK1 signalling axis drives breast cancer cell motility and viability *in vitro* and bone

metastasis *in vivo.*

Our study suggests that proteomics and phosphoproteomics are ideal to identify novel

drivers of metastasis to be used as biomarkers or drug targets in the clinic, as often

dysregulated genes or RNA transcripts identified in patient samples poorly correlate with the

proteomics changes seen in metastases (5, 33). In the future, multi-omics analysis will allow

both identification of more robust biomarkers by integrating information at the DNA, RNA and

protein level and validation of which mutations actually translate to signalling changes to be

used as actionable therapeutic targets (36, 37). Along this line, our manually curated

database provides available information on genes and proteins associated with breast

cancer metastasis and identifies several omics and multi-omics studies of primary and/or

metastatic breast samples, thus offering a vast resource to discover novel biomarkers and

drug targets. Among the limitations of proteomics analysis of large cohort of patient samples

are the availability of fresh frozen rather than paraffin-embedded (not yet suitable for

phosphoproteomics) matched primary and metastatic samples and of the clinical information

associated with them. Our proteomics and phosphoproteomics analysis of fresh frozen

primary breast cancer resection samples provides therefore a unique resource as samples

were manually annotated to determine the presence or absence of organ-specific

metastases within five years of diagnosis, thus overcoming the need for matched metastasis

not commonly available in the clinic or limited to a few surgical settings (38, 39). The

analysis of bulk tumours may be limited by inter-patient heterogeneity in cellular content

between epithelial and stromal cells. Here, to enable good proteome and phosphoproteome

coverage of epithelial cells compared to other cell type we developed a very easy to

implement and cost-effective fractionation method compared to previously used super-

SILAC boosting and extensive fractionation (5). In the foreseeable future, spatial proteomics

based on the integration of laser microdissection, artificial intelligence, single cell selection,

and mass spectrometry hold promise to specifically identify proteomic differences between

the epithelial tumour cells in their microenvironment starting from very low amounts of

material (40).

Our proteomics analysis identified OMD, a monomeric member of the small leucine-rich

repeat protein (SLRP) family (22), as significantly upregulated in patients who developed

bone metastases compared to those who developed metastases at other metastatic sites or

who did not develop metastases. The transcript of OMD was previously identified as

enriched in breast cancer bone metastases compared to breast cancer metastases in other

organs (7) and in prostate cancer bone metastases (21). These findings suggest that OMD

may be a pan-cancer biomarker for bone metastases. However, this idea needs clinical

validation using, for example, a large retrospective cohort study such as the AZURE trial

(41). OMD regulates important cancer pathways, including Ras, P53, Jun/Fos, MYC, and

NFkB signalling (20), but little is known about its role in cancer phenotypes. Although our

data exclude a primary role for OMD in the tested functions of fibroblasts and osteoclasts

using available cell models, OMD may play a role in promoting bone turnover, which is an

essential step in osteosclerotic bone metastases (25). Indeed, OMD interacts with BMP2

and promotes induction of transcription factor SP7 and Runt-related transcription factor 2

(RUNX2), both of which are essential for osteogenesis (42). This idea is supported by our

observation of increased osteoblast calcium deposition in response to the highest tested

concentrations of rOMD. OMD is known to reduce apoptosis in osteoblasts (28), thus

supporting a role for OMD in promoting new bone formation and cell survival. Indeed, in our

patient cohort upregulated OMD expression correlates with upregulation of serine 118

phosphorylation on pro-apoptotic protein BCL2-associated agonist of cell death (BAD). This

site prevents BAD interaction with BCL2 Like 1, thus preventing apoptosis (43). As BAD

serine 118 phosphorylation has been observed in cellular resistance to platinum

chemotherapy (44), OMD and BAD could play a similar role in driving the survival of cancer

cells in breast cancer patients who develop bone metastases, an hypothesis that deserves

further validation. Another intriguing possibility supported by this study is that OMD drives

breast cancer bone metastasis by regulating epithelial cancer signalling. Indeed,

phosphoproteomics analysis identified a correlation between elevated OMD expression and

increased activation of the kinase CDK1 in both cell models and patient samples (8, 37).

Therefore, OMD expression may inform clinicians as to which patients could benefit from

CDK1 inhibition, although this idea needs further immunohistochemistry validation in larger

cohort of samples. Secreted OMD (20) should engage a cell surface receptor, including the

BMP2 receptor complex (42), as BMP2 signalling is associated with bone metastasis (45). In

support of this idea, we identified BMP2-induced kinase (BMP2K) downstream of OMD in

PAO cells. Crosslinking and cell-surface capture mass spectrometry could identify other

candidates and elucidate the signalling pathways downstream of OMD in breast and other

cancer cells.

Our study reveals that the OMD-CDK1 axis is a driver of cell viability and motility, consistent

with the role of CDK1 not only in cell cycle regulation, but also in actin remodelling, a key

process in cell migration (46). We also found increased phosphorylation of vimentin on

Serine 56, which regulates cancer cell invasion (47), in patients who developed metastases

compared to those who did not. The intriguing role of CDK1 as a driver of cell migration and

potential metastasis deserves further investigation in breast and other cancers. Indeed,

CDK1 mRNA is upregulated not only in several transcriptomics datasets of breast cancer

samples compared to normal breast tissue samples (48), but also in melanoma (49), thyroid

cancer (50) and acute myeloid leukaemia (13). Our data suggest that CDK1 inhibition could

serve as a novel therapeutic route to prevent or decrease bone metastasis in breast cancer.

However, the CDK1 inhibitor RO-3306 has been used in few studies *in vivo* (51, 52) but not

in clinical trials in breast or other cancers.. Future studies should aim at testing other CDK1

inhibitors or CDK1 inhibition in combination with other signalling inhibitors. For instance,

among the phosphorylated sites significantly upregulated in patients who developed

metastases compared to those who did not, we also found phosphorylated ser 641 on

catenin alpha 1 (CTNNA1) which activates beta catenin signalling resulting in tumour cell

invasion (53) and phosphorylated Thr185/Tyr187 on MAPK1 which are hyperactive in

metastatic triple negative breast cancer (10). Therefore, our data provides the rationale for

the targeting of MAPK and beta catenin signalling pathways in combination with or

independently of CDK1 inhibition to prevent metastasis.

In conclusion, the identification of the OMD-CDK1 axis from a small-to-medium size cohort

of patient-derived samples with complete clinical information suggests that similar studies

can be performed in any cancer setting including across multiple cancers to identify novel

biomarkers, organotropic metastatic drivers, and therapeutic targets.

Conclusion

Here, osteomodulin (OMD) was found to be significantly upregulated in primary breast

cancer biopsies of patients who developed metastases within five years of diagnosis,

compared to those who did not, and was particularly enriched in patients who developed

bone metastases. Osteomodulin significantly increased cell migration and cell viability as

well as bone colonisation of MDA-MB-231 breast cancer cells and of cells derived from

breast cancer metastatic effusions. Migration, bone colonisation and cell viability were found

to be cyclin dependent kinase- 1 (CDK1)-dependent. This study establishes a role for the

OMD-CDK1 axis in predicting and targeting breast cancer bone metastases that will require

further validation in patients.

List of abbreviations

ADIRF – Adipogenesis Regulatory Factor

AWERB – Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body

BAD – BCL2-Associated Agonist of Cell Death

BOM – Bone-tropic MDA-MB-231 cell line variant with lentiviral expression of mApple

BOO - Bone-tropic MDA-MB-231 cell line variant with lentiviral expression of OMD

CAF – Cancer-Associated Fibroblast

CDK1 – Cyclin-Dependent Kinase 1

CK19 – Cytokeratin 19

CMA1 – Chymase 1

COL11A1 – Collagen Type XI Alpha 1 Chain

COL4A1 – Collagen Type IV Alpha 1 Chain

CTHRC1 – Collagen Triple Helix Repeat Containing 1

DMEM – Dulbecco's Modified Eagle Medium

EIF4B – Eukaryotic Translation Initiation Factor 4B

FFPE – Formalin-Fixed Paraffin-Embedded

GO – Gene Ontology

H&E – Haemotoxylin and Eosin

HER2 – Human Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor 2

HER2+ - Human Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor 2-positive Breast Cancer

HR+ - Hormone Receptor Positive Breast Cancer

KEGG – Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes

MAPK1 – Mitogen-Activated Protein Kinase 1

MXRA5 – Matrix Remodelling Associated 5

OGN - Osteoglycin

OMD – Osteomodulin

PAM - Parental MDA-MB-231 cell line with lentiviral expression of mApple

PAO - Parental MDA-MB-231 cell line with lentiviral expression of OMD

PGRMC1 – Progesterone Receptor Membrane Component 1

RANKL - Receptor Activator of NFκB Ligand

RT-PCR – Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction

SLRP – Small Leucine-Rich Repeat Protein

SNCG – Synuclein Gamma

STMN1 – Stathmin 1

SYNM - Synemin

TN – Triple Negative Breast Cancer

TNC – Tenascin C

VIM - Vimentin

Declarations

Ethics approval

Early breast cancer samples were collected from patients undergoing surgical resection of

the primary tumour at the Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust through the

Manchester Cancer Research Centre Biobank. Fully informed consent from all patients was

obtained in accordance with local National Research Ethics Service Guidelines (Study

Number 12/ROCL/01). Metastatic fluids (ascites or pleural effusions) drained from advanced

breast cancer patients were collected at the Christie and South Manchester Hospitals NHS

Foundation Trusts through the Manchester Cancer Research Centre Biobank. Fully informed

consent from all patients was obtained in accordance with local National Research Ethics

Service guidelines (study numbers: 05/ Q1402/25, 05/Q1403/159, and 12/ROCL/01).

Consent for publication

na

Data Availability Statement

All raw MS data were generated by the authors and deposited to the ProteomeXchange

Consortium, via the PRIDE partner repository with the dataset identifier PXD041719

(Username: reviewer_pxd041719@ebi.ac.uk;   Password: 4PS3MTqM);   PXD041720

(Username: reviewer_pxd041720@ebi.ac.uk;   Password: Tr6QtMFt);   PXD042764

(Username: reviewer_pxd042764@ebi.ac.uk; Password: rsDIM5NX).

The R scripts related to this publication are freely accessible at https://github.com/Joseph-

Parsons/OMD/.

Competing and non-financial competing interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest. All authors give consent for publication.

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Author contributions

HH and SC performed the analysis of CDK1 inhibition *in vivo* experiment. TK helped

preparing metastatic effusion samples for mass spectrometry analysis. PF prepared all

samples for mass spectrometry-based proteomic analysis. KS helped with in

vivo experiments and Alamar blue viability analysis. DB helped with osteoblast alkaline

phosphatase activity assay, osteoblast Alizarin red staining and osteoclast pore forming

assays and their analysis. JF helped cloning and supervised cell work. JW and KT provided

code for the analysis of mass spectrometry data. CB optimised the immunohistochemistry

analysis. N analysed epithelial content of H&E slides from patient resection sample sections.

MPS designed the CDK1 inhibitory experiments. COB devised the project and collated

information on patient samples for mass spectrometry-based analysis. RBC devised the

project and designed in vivo experiments. CF devised the project designed mass

spectrometry and in vitro experiments and obtained funding for the project. JP performed

and analysed all the other experiments. All authors wrote and reviewed the manuscript

before submission.

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Figure legends

Fig. 1. Proteomics analysis identifies enrichment of OMD in samples from patients who

developed bone metastases **A,** Workflow of the proteomics and phosphoproteomics analysis

of patient-derived samples. The characteristics of samples and the numbers of proteins and

phosphorylated sites identified are indicated. Tissue and mouse images were downloaded

from SmartServier Medical Art. **B, C,** Volcano plots showing differentially expressed proteins

(B) or phosphorylated sites (C) based on Limma p value <0.05, Log2 Fold change >1.5

between metastatic and non-metastatic samples. Proteins or sites upregulated in patients

who developed metastases are in orange while proteins and sites downregulated in patients

who developed metastases are in blue. Proteins and phosphorylated sites previously

associated with breast cancer metastasis regulation are labelled. **D,** KEGG and GO terms

enrichment analysis of differentially regulated proteins and phosphorylated sites between

metastatic and non-metastatic samples from B and C. Adjusted p values are generated using Fisher's exact test with Benjamini-Hochberg correction. **E**, Osteomodulin (OMD) log2 normalised protein intensity in non-metastatic patients, metastatic patients, patients who developed bone metastases or patients who developed metastases at any other sites not including bone. Data represent mean +/- SEM of 15 non-metastatic samples compared to 20 metastatic samples, and 12 bone-metastatic samples compared to 8 non-bone metastatic samples (Limma p values ** <0.01, *** <0.001, **** <0.0001) and are rvisualised in the same graph. **F,** OMD mRNA levels in bone metastasis and in metastases to other organs from the GEO datasets (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6424882/). Data (37 bone metastatic patient samples, 148 other metastatic site patient samples) are represented as mean (Limma p values with Benjamini-Hochberg False Discovery Rate Correction < 0.0001****.

Fig. 2. OMD does not affect the responses of fibroblast, osteoblast, and osteoclast cell lines. **A, B,** Immunoblotting analysis with the indicated antibodies of total lysates from MDA-MB-231 cells stably transfected with mApple (PAM) or an OMD-T2A-mApple construct (PAO) and grown in complete or starved medium (A) and of conditioned medium from the same cells (B) N=3 independent biological replicates. **C, D, E,** Collagen contractility assay of HMFU19 immortalised normal fibroblasts (C), 544R immortalised cancer-associated fibroblasts (D) and HFOB 1.19 osteoblasts (E) treated with conditioned medium (CM) from either PAM or PAO and the indicated concentrations of rOMD where collagen plug shrinkage to a % area of its original size over 72 hours represents collagen remodelling compared to time zero. **F, G,** Alkaline phosphatase activity (F) and alizarin red staining (G) of HFOB 1.19 osteoblasts grown at 34°C (undifferentiated) or 39.5^{o}C (differentiated) followed by treatment (or not) with conditioned media or rOMD. **H, I,** Bone resorption assay assessing pit formation (H) and size of pits per well/bone disc (I) of RAW 264.7 monocyte cells differentiated or not to osteoclasts with RANKL and treated or not with conditioned media or rOMD. (C-I) Data is presented as mean +/- SEM of N = 3 independent biological replicates. Experiments with

CM were performed independently of rOMD experiments and were thus not directly

compared. p = <0.05 *, <0.01 **, <0.001 ***, <0.0001 **** rOMD (One Way ANOVA with

Dunnett's Multiple Comparison Test, compared to untreated control

Fig. 3. OMD regulates cell migration *in vitro* and colonization of the bone *in vivo*. **A, C,** Cell

migration of PAM (grey), PAO (red), PAM treated with 10, 100 or 1000 ng/ml of rOMD (A)

and of BOM (green) and BOO (blue) (C) assessed by wound density (percentage of the

wound filled with cells 48 h post-scratch compared to time zero). Data represents the mean

+/- SEM of N = 3 independent biological replicates, each including at least 3 technical

triplicates. *p* =< 0.05*, < 0.01**, < 0.001***, < 0.0001**** (One Way ANOVA with Dunnett's

Multiple Comparison Test, compared to untreated control. **B, D,** Representative images from

A and C, respectively. The yellow lines indicate wound density at 48h. Scale bar = 1mm. **E,**

Number of metastatic lung lesions of over 100µm in diameter (in at least 1 dimension)

following intracardiac injection of 100,000 PAM, PAO, or BOM cells in N=4 athymic nude

mice per condition. **F,** Number of cytokeratin 19-positive human cells identified in cytospun

bone flushes following intracardiac injection of 100,000 PAM, PAO, or BOM cells in N=4

athymic nude mice per condition. *p* =< 0.05*, < 0.01**, < 0.001***, < 0.0001**** (Mean +/-

SEM, Student's *t*-test, each compared to PAM). **G,** Representative images from F where red

arrows indicate CK19-positive areas. Scale bar=1mm.

Fig. 4: Phosphoproteomics identifies the OMD-CDK1 axis in breast cancer cells and patient-

derived samples. **A,** Volcano plot showing differentially regulated phosphorylated sites in

PAO cells compared to PAM cells based on Limma p value <0.05, Log2 Fold Change >1.

Orange, upregulated in PAO; blue, downregulated in PAO; black text, downregulated sites in

PAO compared to PAM and in BOO compared to BOM; red text, sites with metastasis-

associated functions according to Phosphosite plus. **B, C** Immunoblotting analysis with

indicated antibodies of PAM, PAO, BOM and BOO cell lysates (B) followed by quantification

by densitometry and normalisation to vinculin (C). Data is presented as the ratio between the

intensity of CDK1 phosphorylated on Y15 and the intensity of the loading control. Values

were calculated using Image J and are presented relative to PAM band intensity. N = 3

independent biological replicates $p =< 0.05^*, < 0.01^{**}, < 0.001^{***}, < 0.0001^{****}$ (Student's *t*-

test). **D, E,** Expression of OMD and of phosphorylated CDK1 on T14, Y15, or Y19 from two

independent proteomics and phosphoproteomics datasets (8, 33). Data is presented as

mean +/- SEM of Log2 iTRAQ ratios (N=83) and Log TMT ratios (N=122), respectively, and

compared to an internal standard. $p =< 0.05^*, < 0.01^{**}, < 0.001^{***}, < 0.0001^{****}$ (Student's *t*-

test).

Fig. 5. CDK1 regulates cell migration and viability *in vitro* and colonization of the bone *in*

vivo. **A, B,** Cell migration of PAM and PAO cells treated either with DMSO and 10µM RO-

3306 (CDK1i) (A) and of PAO cells treated either with DMSO, 10µM RO-3306, or 10µM

Palbociclib (CDK4,6i) (B) assessed by wound closure over 48hrs and measured by wound

density. Data represent the percentage of the wound filled with cells 48 hours post-scratch.

N = 3 biologically independent replicates. $p =< 0.05^*, < 0.01^{**}, < 0.001^{***}, < 0.0001^{****}$ (One

Way ANOVA with Dunnett's Multiple Comparison Test, compared to untreated control. **C, F,**

Relative viability of PAM and PAO cells (C) and of cells from 5 metastatic pleural effusion (F)

measured by cell fluorescence at 590nm upon reduction of alamar blue stain during

incubation with non-adherent cells for 4 hours. Data is presented as mean +/- SEM of N >=3

independent biological replicates. $P =< 0.05^*, < 0.01^{**}, < 0.001^{***}, < 0.0001^{****}$ (Student's t-

test). **D,** Number of cytokeratin 19-positive human cells identified in cytospun bone flushes

following intracardiac injection of 100,000 PAO cells and treatment with CDK1 inhibitor

4mg/kg RO-3306 or vehicle control 3 times per week for 25 days in N=4 athymic nude mice

per condition. $p =< 0.05^*, < 0.01^{**}, < 0.001^{***}, < 0.0001^{****}$ (Mean +/- SEM, Student's t-test,

each compared to PAM**). E,** Representative images from C where red arrows indicate CK19-

positive areas. Scale bar=1mm**. G,** Correlation between CDK1 Y15 normalised over CDK1

total protein normalised intensity and viability in response to CDK1 inhibition with 10µM RO-

3306. Data is presented as mean response to viability, N=4 independent biological

replicates. P =< 0.05*, < 0.01**, < 0.001***, < 0.0001**** (One-sided Linear Regression t

test).

Fig. 6. Model of the OMD-CDK1 axis driving breast cancer bone metastasis.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5