1 **A small molecule inhibitor of RNA-binding protein IGF2BP3 shows anti-leukemic activity**

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**ABSTRACT**

The RNA-binding protein IGF2BP3 is an oncofetal protein overexpressed in B-acute lymphoblastic leukemia and is critical for leukemogenesis in experimental models. With cancer-specific expression, functional dispensability for normal development, and an unleveraged pro-oncogenic function in mRNA homeostasis, IGF2BP3 represents an excellent target. With no small molecule inhibitors of IGF2BP3 in clinical use, we undertook an effort to identify new IGF2BP3 inhibitors using biochemical methods. A biochemical screen, followed by a cell-based counter screen, led to the identification of compounds with protein-RNA interaction inhibition and leukemic cell growth-inhibitory activity. One of these compounds, designated I3IN-002, shows consistent cell growth-inhibitory activity, altered cell cycle and increased apoptosis in multiple leukemia cell lines, and is the most potent inhibitor of IGF2BP3 reported to date. I3IN-002 was tolerated in mice when administered intraperitoneally and showed potent anti-leukemic activity in a syngeneic transplantation model of MLL-Af4 leukemia. I3IN-002 inhibits the function of IGF2BP3, disrupting in situ binding of IGF2BP3 to target mRNAs, and altering IGF2BP3-dependent gene expression regulation. Furthermore, cell-free and cellular thermal shift assays as well as drug affinity responsive target stability assays support on target activity of I3IN-002 for IGF2BP3. Thus, the identification of I3IN-002 paves the way for the discovery of potent and selective small molecule inhibitors of IGF2BP3.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

In this manuscript, we have identified a small drug like molecule, I3IN-002, which shows anti-

leukemic activity, disrupts IGF2BP3 function in leukemia cells, and paves the for future translation

to the clinic.

**INTRODUCTION**

RNA binding proteins (RBPs) are important players in post-transcriptional gene regulation,

defined as regulation that occurs following the production of an mRNA transcript. Many RBPs are

thought to play a house-keeping role in gene regulation, but others show cancer-specific

expression and may regulate oncogenesis via diverse mechanisms [1-5]. The RNA binding

protein IGF2BP3 was initially discovered as a factor overexpressed in pancreatic cancer and one

of three homologous proteins (IGF2BP1-3) that bound to the 5'-untranslated region of the IGF2

mRNA (1,2). Since its original description, a large body of work has congruently demonstrated

its role as an oncogenic protein in a number of different cancers, and that IGF2BP3 binds to the

3'UTR of mRNA (3). In acute leukemia, we and others initially identified IGF2BP3 as an

upregulated RBP in MLL-translocated B-ALL (4,5). IGF2BP3 is transcriptionally induced by MLL-

AF4, and its expression seems to be restricted to this subtype of acute leukemia. In vivo,

overexpression of IGF2BP3 in bone marrow led to hyperproliferation in hematopoietic stem and

progenitor cells and a pre-leukemic disease with expansion of B- and myeloid cells (4). Moreover,

deletion of *Igf2bp3* in vivo significantly limited leukemia development and increased leukemia-

free survival (6,7). At baseline, the *Igf2bp3* knockout mouse did not show any overt phenotypes,

suggesting that it is dispensable for normal development and homeostasis in the adult. Together

these studies establish IGF2BP3 as an oncogenic target in acute leukemia.

To investigate the molecular mechanisms of IGF2BP3's action, we previously undertook iCLIP-

seq, a technique designed to globally detect RNA molecules bound by IGF2BP3 in conjunction

with differential expression analyses in cells that were depleted for IGF2BP3. These analyses

revealed that IGF2BP3 most commonly binds to the 3'UTR of mRNA transcripts. The regulated

mRNA transcripts included numerous downregulated oncogenes such as *HOXA9*, *CDK6* and

*MYC* (4,6). Importantly, deletion of the RNA-binding domains of IGF2BP3 abrogated stabilization

of these transcripts, and reversed IGF2BP3-driven pre-leukemic disease in vivo (4). Together

these data suggest that IGF2BP3's binding to specific mRNAs is central to its role in promoting

oncogenesis in the hematopoietic system. In addition, data generated by others has now revealed

that epitranscriptomic modification of target mRNAs with N6-methyladenosine ($m^6A$) is a

determinant of IGF2BP3 binding and function, and that spacing between short stretches of RNA

also play a role (8-11). These specific determinants of mRNA binding (i.e., sequence, spacing,

$m^6A$ modifications) by IGF2BP3 formed the basis of our mechanistic understanding of the activity

of this protein. Interference with IGF2BP3 RNA-binding function phenocopies IGF2BP3 loss-of-

function, based on our prior studies (4,6).

RBPs were previously under-represented in targeted therapy approaches due to their presumed

"undruggable" status, recent efforts have uncovered a number of small molecules targeting RBPs,

including the IGF2BP family (12,13). With the oncogenic role of IGF2BP3 established by not only

our studies but also hundreds of studies in the literature, we sought to identify a small molecule

inhibitor of the protein. This would not only serve as a tool compound for further understanding

the mechanism of IGF2BP3, but also as a starting point for a potential therapeutic. To this end,

we developed and validated a time-resolved Förster resonance energy transfer (TR-FRET) assay,

using purified IGF2BP3 protein and a synthetic $m^6A$-modified target RNA molecule to measure

binding. A library of small molecule compounds was applied to this assay, with resultant hit

compounds being re-confirmed in TR-FRET assays and counter screened in cell-based assays.

Confirmatory studies to demonstrate activity in several leukemia cell lines with IGF2BP3

overexpression showed inhibition of cell growth and cell cycle progression, and increased

apoptosis. The first of these compounds, referred to here as I3IN-002, shows activity against

leukemic initiating cells in vitro, and has anti-leukemic activity in vivo.  I3IN-002 directly interferes

with the function of IGF2BP3, as assessed by gene expression analyses and RNA

immunoprecipitation experiments that measure IGF2BP3-dependent gene expression and

IGF2BP3-mRNA binding.  Furthermore, cellular thermal shift assays, cell-free thermal shift assay

(TSA), drug affinity responsive target stability (DARTS) support on-target activity for I3IN-002.

I3IN-002 may prove useful as a tool compound in future biochemical studies involving IGF2BP3

and may also enable the development of a novel therapeutics for the treatment of leukemia and

other cancer types.

**RESULTS**

**Disruptors of protein-RNA interactions are identified via biochemical screening.** Despite the extensive literature describing the cancer-specific function of IGF2BP3, small molecules that specifically target this protein have not yet made any forays into the clinic, and have not been extensively described as tool compounds to explore function. More specifically, a couple of small molecules [32] have been shown to decrease expression of IGF2BP3, and only one compound has been reported to directly inhibit IGF2BP3, with $IC_{50}$ values of 10–40 µM across various ovarian cancer cell lines [35]. To identify putative inhibitors of IGF2BP3 (I3), we designed and validated a time-resolved Förster resonance energy transfer (TR-FRET) assay, based on binding of a GFP-tagged I3 (I3-GFP) to a biotinylated RNA oligonucleotide carrying a $m^6A$ modification (**Fig. 1a**). Small molecules that interfere with this interaction will lead to a loss of signal transfer, and subsequently decreased GFP fluorescence. For this assay, we generated a GFP- and FLAG-tagged IGF2BP3 protein-encoding mammalian expression vector, by adding GFP- and FLAG tags to the carboxy-terminus of the protein (3' end of the DNA construct) and cloned into pcDNA3.1 (**Supp. Fig. 1a**). We confirmed a functional fusion protein based on bright fluorescence following transfection and recognition with anti-IGF2BP3 antibodies (**Supp. Fig. 1b**). The protein was purified by elutions from fractions 3-11 on an anti-FLAG column (**Supp. Fig. 1c**) and subsequently concentrated and quantitated by Coomassie staining (**Supp. Fig. 1d**). Functionality of the protein was further confirmed by RNA immunoprecipitation of target mRNAs such as CDK6 and MYC following incubation of purified protein and pulldown with anti-Flag (**Supp. Fig. 1e-g**). Following purification and confirmation of RNA-binding activity, we confirmed that GFP fluorescence in the TR-FRET assay required the presence of all components (i.e., I3-GFP, biotinylated mRNA, and Terbium, **Fig. 1b**). Protein and RNA concentration dependence of the assay was demonstrated with saturation of the GFP fluorescence signal at approximately 50 nM of I3-GFP-F and 25 nM RNA oligonucleotide **(Fig. 1c and Supp. Fig. 1h)**. Next, we evaluated assay reproducibility across

multiple experiments performed across multiple days, finding excellent concordance in GFP

fluorescence and Z'-values (**Supp. Fig. 1i-j**).

To adapt the assay to high throughput screening, we first successfully miniaturized the assay to

10 μL, while maintaining σ+ <20% and Z'>0.5, with highly reproducible GFP fluorescence (**Supp.**

**Fig. 1k**). Following this validation, a high throughput screen of 196,567 compounds was

completed in two stages, a preliminary screen, and a full-scale screen. We were able to

successfully complete the screen: across 617 plates that were analyzed for this assay, we

achieved >99% of plates that showed standard deviation <20% and 95% of plates showed a Z'

score greater than 0.5 (**Supp. Fig. 2c** and **Fig. 1d**). Plates that showed a low Z'-score were

excluded from downstream hit confirmation. To define hits, we leveraged the preliminary screen

to increase the specificity of hit definition (**Supp. Fig. 2 a-c**). Using only the primary criterion,

defined as |Ratio Z|>3 (where Ratio is the ratio of terbium fluorescence/GFP fluorescence),

corresponding to a greater than 3-standard deviation change in fluorescence from controls, we

obtained a hit rate of 1.33% in the preliminary screen, and 1.73% in the full-scale screen (**Fig.**

**1e**).  Using a secondary criterion, where Terbium fluorescence ("W1") was within one standard

deviation of the mean for the plate (i.e., |W1 Z|<1), this reduced the hit rate to 0.94% and 0.19%

in preliminary and full-scale screens respectively (**Fig. 1e**). The reduced hit rate in the full-scale

screen therefore is most likely due to increased variability in terbium fluorescence. Further

refinements of hits, by an alternate secondary criterion definition (mean and standard deviation

calculated for the experimental run, rather than the plate) and manual curation of the data when

irregularities were observed, led to an initial, high-stringency list of 417 compounds that were

further analyzed. Of the 417 hits out of 186,978 evaluable compounds, 29 contained a core

structure with an indolyltriazine group (**Fig. 1f**).  Remarkably, the library only contained 174 total

compounds with the general structure depicted in **Fig. 1f**, representing ~74-fold enrichment

(range of 57-87-fold, depending on manual curation) for these compounds, a highly statistically

significant result (**Fig. 1g;** p<0.0001; Fisher's exact test). Together, our results identify a number

of small molecules with in vitro activity against the RNA binding activity of IGF2BP3.

**Cell-based counter screen identifies molecules with anti-leukemic activity.**

To further characterize the hits identified from the screen, we first performed a confirmatory TR-

FRET assay, with two experiments consisting of three replicates each. Concordant TR-FRET

findings were characterized as Tier 1, 2 and 3, when findings were reproduced in 2/2, 1/2, or 0/2

experiments respectively.  89.3% (371/417) of hit compounds and 93.1% (27/29) of indolyltriazine

compounds were Tier 1 or Tier 2 hits, respectively (**Supp. Fig. 2d**). Of note, mapping these

compounds back to the primary data from the full-scale screen did not show any obvious trends

in terms of the original single measured parameters in terms of compounds that were Tier 1, Tier

2, or Tier 3 (non-hits). To further examine these confirmed hits, we turned to a cell-based assay

(**Fig. 2a**). Here, we reasoned that a compound that was specific for IGF2BP3 would only show

activity in SEM cell lines that contained intact, increased expression of the protein (SEM-WT),

and should show reduced activity in cell lines where we had experimentally deleted the protein

via CRISPR-Cas9 (SEM-I3KO) (14). Cells were treated with compound, grown for 4 days under

normal growth conditions, and assayed for cell growth with CellTiter-Glo, a luminescence-based

reagent described previously (6,14,15). Fold change from control (i.e., no compound treated

wells) was plotted for SEM-WT versus SEM-I3KO. Remarkably, there were many compounds

that showed enhanced reduction of cell growth in SEM-WT, as opposed to SEM-I3KO (**Fig. 2b**).

We also wanted to include compounds with a significant effect on growth in WTs, even if the

change in the cellular growth ratio was more marginal. Using the cutoff (Growth Ratio<0.7 OR

WT Growth<0.7), we identified 16 compounds. We then chose three promising compounds,

designated **1**, **2** and **3** here, and tested them across a range of concentrations on SEM cells (**Fig.**

**2c-e**).  Of these, **2** and **3**, which we later designated as **I3IN-002** and **I3IN-003**, showed differential

activity in the two cell lines, with **2** showing a promising IC$_{50}$ of ~2 μM in wild-type SEM-cells (**Fig.**

**2d**).

**I3IN-002 inhibits cell proliferation and cell cycle progression and promotes apoptosis.**

To enable further biological evaluation, we sought to prepare **I3IN-002** in high purity and in larger

quantities compared to what was available commercially. Moreover, chemical characterization

data for **I3IN-002** was not identified in the literature. To access **I3IN-002**, we performed the

synthetic route shown in (**Fig. 3a**). First isatin **4** was treated with thiosemicarbazide (**5**) and

potassium carbonate in methanol at ambient temperature to give hydrazone formation. The

hydrazone intermediate was subjected to potassium carbonate in water at reflux to give

triazinoindolothione **6** (16). In the next step, intermediate **6** was treated with alkyl chloride **7** in the

presence of potassium carbonate in DMSO (17). This delivered **I3IN-002**, which was isolated as

a powder. The purity of **I3IN-002** was deemed to be >97% by both quantitative ^{1}H NMR and HPLC

analysis.

To characterize the activity of I3IN-002, we tested the compound in a number of leukemia models,

including SEM, RS4;11, PER 785, KASUMI-2, NALM6, REH, and MLL-Af4 Lin- cells. The IC50

experiments performed on these cell lines showed the compound is more potent in B-ALL cell

lines with MLL-AF4 translocation, with lower IC50 values compared to other B-ALL cells (**Fig. 3b**).

Remarkably, treatment with a single dose of I3IN-002 resulted in a dose-dependent growth

inhibition of SEM, RS4;11 and Lin-MLL-Af4 cells at the concentrations tested in our assays (**Fig.**

**3c-e**).  Moreover, cell cycle profiling using propidium iodide in SEM and RS4;11 cells both showed

an increase in sub-G0 cells (**Fig. 3f and Supp. Fig. 3a-3c**); changes in other phases of cell cycle

were not as consistent, because in SEM cells the G2-M transition genes such as CDK1 and

CCNB2, which are also IGF2BP3 targets, were downregulated due to compound treatment

(**Supp. Fig. 3d-3e**). Next, we analyzed the effect of I3IN-002 on cellular apoptosis. These studies

suggest an increase in apoptosis, as detected by Caspase 3/7 activity in both SEM and RS4;11

cells (**Fig. 3g and Supp. Fig. 3f**, respectively).  Treatment also led to a numerically small but

statistically significant increase in Annexin V+ cells as well as in necrotic cells (Annexin V+ and

Propidium iodide+) in both SEM and RS4;11 cells (**Fig. 3h and Supp. Fig. 3g-i**). Together, these

studies indicate that I3IN-002 impacts cell growth, cell cycle and apoptosis in a variety of target

cell lines, including four different models of MLL-AF4-driven leukemia, and one AML cell line.

Moreover, the effect is conserved between species, in both human and murine cell lines.

**Reduction of leukemia initiating cells and leukemia engraftment in vivo by I3IN-002.**

Given our previous work showing that genetic ablation of *Igf2bp3* led to a reduction in leukemia

initiating cells, we next assayed whether I3IN-002 caused an effect on plating efficiency in

methylcellulose colony formation assays. Like I3KO, I3IN-002 led to a reduction in total colony

counts in a dose-dependent manner and a reduction in the fraction of cells that showed

expression of CD34 and c-kit (**Fig. 3i-j and Supp. Fig. 3j**). With these findings, we next evaluated

the compounds in vivo.

Next, mice syngeneically transplanted with the Lin-MLL-Af4 cells (either WT or I3KO, **Supp. Fig.**

**4a**) were injected intraperitoneally with I3IN-002 or vehicle control using the schedule indicated

(**Fig. 4a**). This model demonstrates a rapid and lethal leukemia that primarily involves the bone

marrow and spleen, with lesser involvement of the peripheral blood.  Importantly, genetic ablation

of *Igf2bp3* extends survival and prevents leukemia development for greater than 100 days (14,15).

Here, we used the genetic deletion as a positive control for the predicted effect of IGF2BP3

inhibition. Upon harvest at 4 weeks post-transplant, WT-transplanted mice that received I3IN-002

showed significantly reduced spleen size and weight compared to vehicle treated control mice,

but larger than I3KO-transplanted mice (**Fig. 4b and 4d**). Histologically, we observed lower levels

of leukemic engraftment in the liver (compare cellular area next to arrow) and reduced

architectural distortion and lower leukemic engraftment in the spleen (compare size of dotted

areas and intervening cellularity) in I3IN-002 treated mice, and as expected in I3KO (**Fig. 4c**).

Similar reductions in engraftment were also noted in lung and kidney (**Supp. Fig. 4f**). Similar to

what was observed in vitro, FACS analysis revealed that in vivo treatment reduced the number of

CD34+ c-kit+ cells in both the spleen and the bone marrow (**Fig. 4e (spleen), 4h and 4k**). In the

spleen, leukemic engraftment and the proportion of CD11b+ cells and of CD34+ Sca1- cells were

reduced significantly (**Fig. 4f-g** and **Supp. Fig. 4b-4c**). In the bone marrow, overall leukemic

engraftment was not different following I3IN-002 treatment compared to vehicle, but significant

reductions in CD11b+ and CD34+ Sca1- cells were noted (**Fig. 4j** and **Supp. 4d-4e**). Further, we

found significant improvement in overall survival following I3IN-002 treatment in a separate set of

endpoint experiments (**Fig. 4l**). Together, these data indicate a significant effect by intraperitoneal

injection of I3IN-002 on leukemic burden, as measured by gross microscopic histology and flow

cytometry, and corresponding with a reduction in the leukemic initiating cell fraction, thus inhibiting

leukemogenesis and extending survival.

**I3IN-002 inhibits the molecular function of IGF2BP3 in post-transcriptional gene regulation.**

Prior work by our group and others (18) has shown that IGF2BP3 functions in post-transcriptional

gene regulation by binding to mRNA molecules and regulating their expression.  To test whether

I3IN-002, a compound discovered via biochemical screening and confirmed to have cellular

activity, acts through IGF2BP3, we first performed RNA immunoprecipitation (RIP) following

treatment with I3IN-002.  We found that four mRNAs that we have previously found to be

associated with IGF2BP3, *CDK6, MYC, BCL2,* and *HOXA9*, were decreased in the

immunoprecipitate following IGF2BP3 pulldown (**Fig. 5a-b** and **Supp. Fig. 5a-b**). Next, to assess

*in situ* binding of I3IN-002 to IGF2BP3, we performed a cellular thermal shift assay, finding a

difference in thermal stability, as assessed by Western blot (**Fig. 5c-d**). Direct interaction of I3IN-

002 with IGF2BP3 was confirmed using orthogonal methods.  Thermal shift assay (TSA) using

purified full length IGF2BP3 demonstrated stabilization of IGF2BP3 with compound (**Fig. 5e**),

while DARTS demonstrated I3IN-002 dependent inhibition of protease mediated degradation of

IGF2BP3  (**Supp. Fig. 5c**). To understand the downstream consequences of IGF2BP3 inhibition,

we performed RNA-seq of DMSO-treated, I3IN-002-treated and I3KO SEM cells. These studies

resulted in the identification of differentially expressed genes between SEM-WT and SEM-I3KO

(n=319 genes) as well as between SEM-WT and SEM-WT-I3IN-002 treated cells (n=226 genes).

Volcano plots demonstrated that the overall changes in gene expression were more pronounced

in the genetic knockout of IGF2BP3 compared to I3IN-002 treated cells (**Fig. 5f**). However, the

relative proportion of downregulated and upregulated genes appeared to be somewhat similar.

Remarkably, 63 genes were common between the two datasets, which represents a highly

significant overlap (nearly 28% of genes regulated by I3IN-002 treatment; Hypergeometric test,

p-value< $10^{-16}$; **Fig. 5g**). Gene set enrichment analyses of the overlap genes between I3KO and

I3IN-002 treated cells showed many pathways that we have previously associated with IGF2BP3

function, including response to oxidative stress, cell activation, cellular response to cytokine

stimulus, neutrophil degranulation, etc. (**Fig. 5h**). A selected panel of differentially regulated

genes were confirmed by RT-qPCR (**Fig. 5i-n and Supp. Fig. 5e-f**), and Western blotting

confirmed the downregulation of CDK6 and BCL2 proteins that we have previously observed with

I3KO (**Fig. 5o**). Given these findings, we also queried the expression of various IGF2BP3 targeted

mRNAs in spleen specimens from mice treated in vivo, as described in **Fig. 4**. Several mRNAs,

including Myc, Cdk6, and Hoxa9 were downregulated in spleen samples from mice treated with

I3IN-002 based on RT-qPCR (**Supp. Fig. 5g-5l**). While these findings support a mechanism

wherein I3IN-002 is binding to and impacting the function of IGF2BP3, off-target effects cannot

be ruled out.

**DISCUSSION**

The RNA-binding protein IGF2BP3 is a potent oncofetal protein, as demonstrated by our work

and that of many others. We chose IGF2BP3 as a target in acute leukemia following our work

demonstrating that it is overexpressed in patients with MLL-AF4 translocated acute leukemia,

from genetic gain and loss-of-function experiments in cell lines and mouse models, and a

mechanistic understanding of its RNA binding function. In this manuscript, we describe the

successful completion of a high-throughput biochemical screening assay that utilizes the RNA-

binding function of IGF2BP3 as the discriminant for small molecule activity. Combining the

biochemical screen with a cell-based assay to detect IGF2BP3-dependent effects on leukemic

cell growth and survival, we identified 16 compounds that are likely to have activity in an IGF2BP3-

specific manner.  The first of these compounds to be confirmed is I3IN-002, which shows an $IC_{50}$

of approximately 2 $\mu$M in initial assays. Specifically, I3IN-002 inhibited cell growth, impacted cell

cycle progression of treated cells, and increased apoptosis. I3IN-002 inhibited leukemia initiating

cells and showed in vivo anti-leukemic activity. Furthermore, I3IN-002 impacted global gene

expression in a manner similar to genetic deletion of IGF2BP3. CETSA, TSA, DARTS and RNA

immunoprecipitation experiments supported on-target activity against IGF2BP3. These results

provide evidence that I3IN-002 inhibits IGF2BP3.

RNA binding proteins have recently been appreciated as biologically and clinically significant

regulators of gene expression (12,19-21). This recognition has led to a growing effort to target

RNA binding proteins with small molecule or oligonucleotide-based strategies (12,22).  However,

many cancer-associated RNA binding proteins are also required for normal homeostasis, and

hence, targeting these proteins might engender significant toxicity. Given this concern, discerning

RBPs that have cancer-specific expression is a major effort in the field, and the IGF2BP family of

proteins have emerged as cancer-specific or cancer-enriched proteins. Second, while

oligonucleotide-based therapies hold great promise, targeting of many tissues, including cancer,

remains a major challenge in the field. Hence, small molecule targeting holds many advantages,

including delivery, with development of reproducible and straightforward synthesis methods

allowing for future large-scale manufacturing and distribution. In recent years, several small

molecules have been reported to inhibit the IGF2BP family of proteins, either by binding directly,

or by decreasing expression of the protein. Perhaps the earliest inhibitor reported was an

isocorydine derivative, 8-amino-ICD, which was reported to target hepatocellular carcinoma and

decrease IGF2BP3 expression at $EC_{50}$ of 20 $\mu$M or greater (23).  In non-small cell lung cancer, it

has been found that isoliquiritigenin is also able to down-regulate IGF2BP3 expression in a dose-

dependent manner (24). Another inhibitor, BTYNB, was reported to target IGF2BP1 in the 5-10

$\mu$M range (25).  In the last few years, several inhibitors have been reported to target IGF2BP2 at

a range of concentrations in acute T-lymphoblastic leukemia and acute myeloid leukemia (13,26),

including CWI1-2 (sub-micromolar $IC_{50}$ in AML cell lines) and JX1(10-20 $\mu$M $IC_{50}$). Most recently,

a virtual screening approach identified AE-848 as an inhibitor of IGF2BP3 with an $IC_{50}$ of ~10-40

$\mu$M in ovarian cancer (27). Hence, the targeting of IGF2BP family proteins is of great interest in

the field, but to date, there are no small molecules in clinical use or in the clinical trial pipeline to

target IGF2BP3. Our discoveries here indicate that I3IN-002 is the most potent inhibitor of

IGF2BP3 reported to date, which provides the impetus for further drug discovery efforts.

Biologically active small molecules containing indolyltriazine cores possess potent and selective

activity across a variety of indications. Other anti-cancer compounds containing the motif include

an inhibitor of tyrosine phosphatase SHP-2(28), and a commercially available tool compound,

Inauhzin, which acts as a SIRT-1 inhibitor (29). Further, this motif has been also found in

antibiotics, $\alpha$-glucosidase inhibitors, and targeted p-glycoprotein inhibitors, amongst other classes

of biologically relevant molecules (30-33). Notably, many of these compounds are demonstrated

to be highly selective. This relatively diverse set of targets is consistent with our findings that small

changes in the structure can markedly alter the bioactivity of the indolyltriazine in acute leukemia

(i.e., only 2 out of 29 TR-FRET-active indolyltriazine compounds tested showed bioactivity). In

other words, the specificity of the compounds may be highly malleable with chemical modifications

of the side chains. Based these data, we have some early indications of structural constraints on

compounds that might be viable biologically. Our initial efforts indicate that I3IN-002 can be readily

synthesized using widely commercially available component molecules. This information should

enable future efforts to develop compound analogs of I3IN-002 that display selective binding to

IGF2BP3, without off-target effects.  Importantly, while the indolyltriazine is seemingly privileged

with respect to bioactivity, it is not found in any commercially available drugs to date.

It is also of interest to note that we recently showed that IGF2BP3 genetic ablation was additive

with menin inhibition in MLL-AF4 leukemia (14).  MLL-AF4 leads to a dramatic dysregulation of

transcription driven by inappropriate recruitment of elements of the super elongation complex to

areas bound by MLL(34).  Hence, an RNA binding protein may be particularly important in this

context. While outside the scope of this report, compounds generated here could therefore be

useful in combinatorial therapeutic approaches with menin inhibition. It should be noted here that

recent work claimed a somewhat contradictory role for IGF2BP3 in stabilizing MLL fusion

transcripts, perhaps due to significantly different models and readouts used in the paper (35).

Nonetheless, IGF2BP3 targets include a number of key oncogenic proteins, which are themselves

the targets of advanced small molecule development programs. For example, CDK6 is a direct

target of IGF2BP3 that is upregulated by the latter's activity, and anti-CDK4/6 inhibitors have been

developed as potent agents in cancer therapy, for example, in breast cancer (36).  BCL2 is also

a direct target of IGF2BP3, and the BCL2 inhibitor Venetoclax has shown activity in a number of

hematologic malignancies, including B-ALL and AML.  Other targets, such as MYC, which have

long been elusive are also now being actively pursued with small molecule approaches (37).

Hence, our development of small molecule inhibitors could be especially important in future

combinatorial therapy approaches, and is an important future direction for our work.

While this work contains important advances, we acknowledge limitations of our study. Despite

exhaustive attempts, efforts to produce large quantities of full-length, untagged proteins have thus

far been unsuccessful, limiting our ability to perform detailed binding affinity measurements. We

believe this may be due to intrinsic properties of the protein, which is known to be present in stress

granules and undergo phase separation (57). While we see evidence of protein-compound

binding, we have thus far not been able to quantify the strength of binding in vitro.  Moreover, off-

target effects cannot yet be ruled out and pharmacological properties will need to be optimized.

Thus, future directions will involve analog synthesis and biochemical evaluation to ultimately

improve and validate selective binding to IGF2BP3, while also optimizing drug-like properties.

Overall, our study has led to the discovery and validation of I3IN-002, a small molecule that inhibits

IGF2BP3. While our work has thus far focused on the role of IGF2BP3 in acute leukemia, it is

estimated that up to 15% of all human cancers overexpress IGF2BP3, based on the COSMIC

database, and there are several excellent reviews on this topic (3,18,38). This includes a number

of distinct epithelial malignances and subtypes of hematolymphoid cancer (39-46). Knockdown of

IGF2BP3 inhibits cancer cell growth, motility and features of aggressive cancer in a variety of

cancer subtypes (8,44,47,48). The IGF2BP3 protein shows a pattern of expression consistent

with an "oncofetal protein"(49), with very low to absent expression in adult tissues.  Consistent

with this notion, our work has determined that IGF2BP3 appears to be largely dispensable in

homeostatic development (6), providing a significant therapeutic window for targeting.  It should

be noted that IGF2BP3 expression is quite variable within different cancer types, and hence,

future indications would need to be carefully defined. We speculate that IGF2BP3 expression

could be evaluated in different cancer types by widely available techniques such as

immunohistochemistry; and compounds such as I3IN-002, or future derivatives could be

administered as a precision medicine intervention in carefully selected patients. Hence, I3IN-002

serves as a promising lead compound for future drug discovery efforts aimed at identifying

selective inhibitors of IGF2BP3, particularly for the treatment of acute leukemia.

**METHODS**

**A complete description of methods can be found in Supplementary Information.**

**Cell lines and cell culture**

All cell lines were maintained in standard condition in incubator at 37 °C and 5% $CO_2$. Human B-

ALL cell lines, RS4;11 (ATCC CRL-1873), NALM6 (ATCC CRL-3273), SEM (DMZ-ACC 546),

PER785 , REH (ATCC CRL-8286 ), and KASUMI-2 (DSMZ ACC 526), and immortalized MLL-Af4

transformed murine HSPCs were cultured as previously described (15). A full listing of reagents

is provided in **Supp. Table 1**.

**Antibodies.** Antibodies were used for Western blotting, FACS, and immunoprecipitation

experiments as described (4,6,14,15).  A list of antibodies is provided in Supp. Table 2.

**Protein Purification and High throughput assays.**

IGF2BP3-GFP-Flag over-expression plasmid was constructed by fusing full length IGF2BP3 CDS

with GFP CDS and Flag CDS and cloned in pCDNA 3.0 vector. Protein was purified using

standard methods and anti-Flag based affinity purification. Purified protein was added to pre-

incubated Streptavidin-terbium plus biotinylated m6A-labeled RNA oligonucleotide (**Supp. Table**

**4**). The plate was incubated for 1 hr. at RT for binding and read on EnVision microplate reader

(Perkin Elmer) with a dual PMT configuration using a 340 nm excitation and a dual emission mirror

block with using a 495 nm emission filter for Terbium fluorescence (W1 channel) and a 525 nm

emission filter for GFP fluorescence (W2 channel). The assay was miniaturized to 10uL in 384-

well plates and an in-house compound deck at UCLA MSSR was applied to the assay, with

parameters as described in Results.  Data analysis was performed as described in Supplementary

Methods to identify a preliminary list of hits.

**437**    **Counter-Screen and Cell-based Assays.**

**438**    Wild type and IGF2BP3-deleted SEM cell lines (14) were treated with compound, grown for 4

**439**    days under normal growth conditions, and assayed for cell growth in 384-well plates with CellTiter-

**440**    Glo, a luminescence-based reagent described previously (6,14,15).  Following identification of

**441**    lead compounds, further measurements of apoptosis, cell cycle and proliferation were performed

**442**    as we have previously described(6,14,15).

**443**

**444**    **Compound Synthesis.**   Briefly, organic synthesis was performed based on utilizing

**445**    commercially available fragments and a custom in-house strategy allowing for the design of he

**446**    original compound and future analogs.  Full description is provided in the Supplementary

**447**    Methods.

**448**

**449**    **Assays to define on-target activity.**

**450**    A cellular thermal shift assay was performed on SEM cells treated with the test compound, based

**451**    on published protocols with minor modifications described in the Supplemental methods (50).

**452**    Thermal shift assay with purified protein, and Drug Affinity responsive target stability assays were

**453**    performed as previously described (51,52).  Lastly, RNA immunoprecipitation and RNA-

**454**    sequencing were performed as we have described in prior publications(4,14).

**455**

**456**    **Animal Experiments**

**457**    For in vivo studies, C57BL/6J, B6.SJL-*Ptprc$^a$ Pepc$^{b,}$*/BoyJ (B6 CD45.1),  and B6J.129(Cg)-

**458**    Gt(ROSA)26Sor$^{tm1.1(CAG-cas9_*,-EGFP)Fezh}$/J (Cas9-GFP, BL/6J) were procured from The Jackson

**459**    Laboratory. Preliminary toxicity studies were carried out to identify issues with small molecule

**460**    delivery in non-transplanted mice. Primary murine leukemia cells (WT and Igf2bp3 KO) as

**461**    previously described (14) were transplanted into busulfan-conditioned recipients. Dosing was

462    carried out intraperitoneally, 3 times a week for three weeks. Once the peripheral blood

463    engraftment reached >20% at 4 weeks, the experiment was terminated and tissues were

464    harvested to be analyzed by FACS, histology and RT-qPCR. A separate experiment examined

465    overall and leukemia free survival.  All of the animal experiments received Institutional Animal

466    Research Committee approval at UCLA.

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**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

A.K.J.: Designed research, Performed experiments, Acquired data, Analyzed data, Generated Figures, Wrote manuscript, Experimental Lead

G.M.S.: Performed experiments, Acquired data, Analyzed data, Assisted in generating figures

M.L.T.: Performed experiments, Acquired data, Analyzed data

J.P.S.: Performed experiments, Acquired data, Analyzed data

C.Y.: Performed experiments

M.M.M.: Performed experiments, Acquired data, Analyzed data

G.S.: Performed experiments

T.M.T.: Performed experiments

T.L.L.: Performed experiments, Acquired data

A.C.: Performed experiments, Acquired data

A.J.R.: Analyzed data

J.R.S.: Analyzed data

R.S.K.: Provided MLL AF4 B-ALL cell line

R.D.D.: Designed research, Analyzed data

N.K.G.: Designed research, Analyzed data, Edited manuscript

D.S.R.: Designed research, Analyzed data, Wrote manuscript, Secured Funding, Project leader

503 **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

504 DSR has served as a consultant to AbbVie, a pharmaceutical company that develops and markets

505 drugs for hematologic disorders. AKJ, MLT, GMS, JPS, RDD, NKG and DSR are inventors on a

506 patent application that includes the compound I3IN-002.

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662

 **FIGURE LEGENDS**

**Figure 1. Design and execution of a high throughput assay to identify small molecule**

**inhibitors of IGF2BP3.**

a. Schematic of assay. IGF2BP3-GFP fusion protein is bound to an $m^6A$-modified, biotinylated

RNA oligonucleotide, which in turn is bound to Streptavidin Terbium (SA-Tb). Förster resonance

energy transfer occurs when the protein and RNA are bound.

b. GFP Fluorescence (fold over control) plotted for different combinations of Streptavidin Terbium

(SA-Tb), IGF2BP3-GFP (I3-GFP), m6A-modified RNA (m6A RNA) or unmethylated, biotinylated

RNA (RNA).

c. GFP Fluorescence (arbitrary units) as a function of IGF2BP3-GFP protein concentration.

d. High throughput screening assay Z'-scores for control reactions across 600+ plates screening

over 186,978 compounds.

e. Screening was conducted first with a limited set of compounds (preliminary screen) prior to a

full-scale screen. Fluorescence ratios were calculated as W1/W2 where W1 is the Terbium

fluorescence and W2 is the GFP fluorescence. Shown are the percent of compounds satisfying a

single criterion (i.e., Ratio Z) or two criteria (Ratio Z and W1 Z).

f. First "core structure" identified from the screen. The indolyltriazine substructure was conserved

across multiple hits from screening in d and e.

g. Comparison of total number of hits in the library, versus hits amongst compounds containing

the first core structure; Fisher's exact test, p<0.0001.

**Figure 2. Identification of molecules with biochemical activity and IGF2BP3-dependent**

**anti-proliferative properties.**

a. Counter-screen strategy: SEM cells with (SEM-WT) and without IGF2BP3 (SEM-I3KO) are

treated in a medium-throughput format with the small molecules identified from the biochemical

screen.

b. Scatter plot examining the relationship between relative changes in cell growth, measured by

CellTiterGlo and normalized to DMSO control, in SEM-WT (x-axis) and SEM-I3KO (y-axis).

Compounds *1*, *2* and *3* (red-brown) were noted to have a preferential effect on SEM-WT and a

lesser effect in SEM-I3KO. Cells were treated with 5 µM solutions of test compounds.

c-e. Structures of compounds *1*, *2* and *3* (top) and corresponding concentration dependent

changes in cell growth rate (bottom) for the three compounds with favorable characteristics on

screening.  Growth rate was measured using CellTiterGlo and normalized to DMSO control in

SEM-WT cell line.

**Figure 3. I3IN-002 alters cell growth, cell cycle, and apoptosis in human and mouse**

**leukemic cells.**

a. Chemical synthesis of **I3IN-002**.

b. IC50 values of I3IN-002 on MLLr B-ALL and B-ALL cell lines.

c-e. Concentration-dependent alterations of cell growth curves over 4 days of cell culture with

I3IN-002 treatment, assessed by CellTiterGlo assay, and plotted as relative luminescence units

(RLU). SEM (c), RS4;11 (d), and Lin-/MLL-Af4 (e) cells were assayed in this experiment. Data

represent mean and standard error of mean in 8 replicates.

f. Measurement of SubG0 cells by propidium iodide staining in SEM and RS4;11 cells,

respectively, following treatment with 5 µM I3IN-002 or DMSO. Data represents mean and

standard error of mean of the calculated percentage of cells at each stage of cell cycle with 3

replicates.

g.  Measurement of apoptosis induction, by Caspase 3/7 activity assay in SEM cells.  Data

represents mean and standard error of mean with 8 replicates.

h. Measurement of cell death by orthogonal method of Annexin V and propidium iodide staining

in SEM cells.  Shown are the % of cells that are single or double positive for propidium iodide and

Annexin V.

i. Quantitation of a leukemic stem-cell enriched population by assaying the CD34+ c-kit+

population following in vitro treatment of Lin-/MLL-Af4 cells in culture.

j. Measurement of colony formation in methylcellulose following treatment of a murine model of

MLL-Af4 driven leukemia (14,15) with I3IN-002.  Data represents the mean number of total

colonies for each condition, with 3 replicates per condition. I3KO represents genetic knockout of

IGF2BP3, which results in reduced colony formation

For Figure 3, statistical significance was evaluated by student's T-test, *p<0.05; **p<0.01;

***p<0.001; ****p<0.0001.

**Figure 4. I3IN-002 inhibits leukemic growth in vivo.**

a. Schematic of mouse experiment.

b. Gross pathology photographs of murine spleens from mice syngeneically transplanted with Lin-

/MLL-Af4 cells.  I3KO are genetic knockouts of IGF2BP3, which markedly reduced leukemic

engraftment.

c. Histology of liver (top) and spleen (bottom) from treated mice, as indicated.  Arrow indicates a

leukemic infiltrate in the liver in the portal area.  Dotted lines indicate splenic white pulp, with

leukemic infiltrates in the red pulp (area outside the dotted lines).  Hematoxylin and eosin staining,

original magnification,  200X.

d. Splenic weights from treated mice, as indicated.

e. FACS staining for CD34 and c-kit in the spleen of treated mice, as indicated.

f-i.  Quantification of overall leukemia engraftment and various leukemia subsets in the spleen.

j-k. Quantification of overall leukemia engraftment and various leukemia subsets in the bone

marrow.

l. Kaplan-Meier survival curve shows effect of I3IN-002 injection on overall survival in syngeneic

bone marrow transplant experiment.

Data in e-k represents one experiment composed of the following numbers of animals: Vehicle,

n=8; I3IN-002, n=7; I3KO, n=5.   Statistical significance was evaluated by student's T-test,

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; ****p<0.0001.

**Figure 5.  I3IN-002 shows on-target activity in leukemia cells.**

a. Western blot analysis of RNA immunoprecipitation samples following treatment of SEM cells

with 5 μM I3IN-002. Input represents the input cell lysate; IgG represents a control

immunoprecipitation with isotype control: and "IP" represents anti-IGF2BP3 immunoprecipitation.

b. Quantification of *CDK6* and *BCL2* RNA recovered from RNA immunoprecipitation experiments

with or without treatment with I3IN-002.

c-d. Cellular thermal shift assay; Western blots of IGF2BP3 and beta-actin are shown following

treatment of cells with I3IN-002 or DMSO control, followed by heat-mediated denaturation and

removal of denatured protein (c) and quantification of western blot (d).

e. Thermal shift assay using purified full length IGF2BP3 protein.

f.  Volcano plots of differentially expressed genes with genetic IGF2BP3 knockout (left) and with

I3IN-002 treatment (top) in SEM cells, using DESeq analysis on RNA-sequencing data from SEM

cells treated with DMSO, I3IN-002 and SEM/I3KO.

g. Venn diagram of shared differentially expressed genes with IGF2BP3 knockout and I3IN-002

treatment in SEM cells. Hypergeometric test of overlap showed a p-value<10^{-16}.

h. GSEA analysis of the overlapped genes between I3KO and I3IN-002 treated cells.

i-n.  RT-qPCR based confirmation of genes showing common differential regulation between I3IN-

002 treatment and genetic knockout of IGF2BP3 (I3KO). Data are shown as fold change, following

normalization to DMSO, with 3 replicate measurements per sample.

o. Western blot measurement of CDK6, and BCL2, which are known targets of IGF2BP3.

# Figure 1.

# Figure 2.

**Figure 3.**

**Figure 4.**

**Figure 5.**