DOT1L suppresses nuclear RNAi originating from enhancer

elements in *Caenorhabditis elegans*

Ruben Esse,[1] Ekaterina Gushchanskaia,[1] Avery Lord,[1] and Alla Grishok[1,2]

[1]Department of Biochemistry, Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, MA 02118,

USA

[2]Correspondence: agrishok@bu.edu (A.G.)

Abstract

Methylation of histone H3 lysine 79 by DOT1L is associated with actively transcribed

genes. DOT-1.1, the *Caenorhabditis elegans* DOT1L homologue, cooperates with the

chromatin-binding protein ZFP-1 (AF10 homologue) to negatively modulate transcription

of highly and widely expressed target genes. Also, *zfp-1* deficiency is linked to reduced

RNA interference response. In addition, in MLL-rearranged leukemia, H3K79

methylation at homeobox genes antagonizes repressive chromatin marks. Here, we

connect these various manifestations of DOT1L function. We demonstrate that DOT1L

suppresses transcription at enhancers, thereby preventing double-stranded RNA

formation and ectopic histone H3 lysine 9 methylation. Moreover, we show that lethality

of *dot-1.1* mutant worms is suppressed by mutations in the RNAi pathway, suggesting

ectopic activation of endogenous RNAi in the absence of DOT1L. Since DOT1L is

conserved and similarly prevents H3K9 methylation in *C. elegans* and mammals, our

observations point to a possible link between nuclear RNAi and H3K9 methylation in

higher organisms.

22 Introduction

Screens for chromatin-binding factors involved in RNAi in *C. elegans* have identified the

zinc finger protein ZFP-1 as a putative mediator of dsRNA-induced silencing in the

nucleus (Grishok et al. 2005; Kim et al. 2005; Dudley et al. 2002). Interestingly, its

mammalian homologue, AF10, is a frequent fusion partner of MLL in chimeric proteins

causing leukemia (Meyer et al. 2018), and its interaction with H3K79 methyltransferase

DOT1L is critical for DOT1L recruitment to the *HOXA9* and *MEIS1* genes and their

subsequent hyperactivation (Okada et al. 2005). In the attempt to identify proteins

interacting with ZFP-1 that could explain its role in RNAi, we have previously identified a

C. elegans homologue of DOT1L, which we named DOT-1.1, as the major ZFP-1

binding partner (Cecere et al. 2013).

Although DOT1L is the only H3K79 methyltransferase in mammals and H3K79

methylation is present on all actively transcribed genes, inhibition of DOT1L

methyltransferase activity does not result in dramatic changes in gene expression in

cultured cells (Zhu et al. 2018). However, expression of specific genes, such as *HOXA9*

and *MEIS1*, is strongly dependent on DOT1L, especially in leukemias induced by MLL-

fusion proteins (Okada et al. 2005). The importance of H3K79 methylation in

antagonizing heterochromatin formation at the *HOXA* cluster has recently been

established (Chen et al. 2015), resembling pivotal studies in yeast showing that Dot1

prevents the spreading of factors associated with heterochromatin into active regions

(Katan-Khaykovich and Struhl 2005; Ng et al. 2002). Importantly, knockout of DOT1L in

mice results in embryonic lethality, underscoring its important developmental function. In

Drosophila, both DOT1L (*Grappa*) and AF10 (*Alhambra*) mutants showed

developmental defects (Mohan et al. 2010; Shanower et al. 2005). In *C. elegans*, we

observed specific developmental abnormalities in a *zfp-1* loss-of-function mutant, such

as defects in neuronal migration (Kennedy and Grishok 2014), and implicated ZFP-1 in

lifespan control (Mansisidor et al. 2011). Whether or not the anti-silencing effect of

DOT1L contributes to its developmental role is presently not known.

We previously established that, in *C. elegans*, ZFP-1 and DOT-1.1 co-localize to

promoters of highly and widely expressed genes and negatively modulate their

expression during development (Cecere et al. 2013). This mechanism is likely

conserved and applicable to the majority of ubiquitously expressed genes in other

systems. Here, we demonstrate the role of the ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 complex in enhancer

regulation. Known epigenetic signatures typical of active enhancers include histone H3

lysine 27 acetylation (H3K27ac) and histone H3 lysine 4 monomethylation (H3K4me1),

whereas high level of H3K27me3 and absence of H3K27ac are found on enhancers

poised for later tissue-specific expression (Bonn et al. 2012). Enhancer elements are

themselves transcription units, generating non-coding enhancer RNAs (eRNAs) (Li et al.

2016), and, most recently, regulation of enhancer transcription was shown to be very

similar to that of protein-coding genes (Henriques et al. 2018). Indeed, we show that

DOT-1.1 negatively modulates enhancer RNA transcription, similarly to the negative

modulation of active genes described earlier (Cecere et al. 2013). Moreover, we find an

antagonistic relationship between H3K79 methylation and H3K9 methylation at

enhancers, a mechanism consistent with studies in leukemic cells (Chen et al. 2015).

Finally, we demonstrate that suppression of anti-sense transcription by ZFP-1/DOT-1.1

prevents dsRNA formation and induction of nuclear RNAi via the Dicer/RDE-4/RDE-1

pathway, which likely promotes H3K9 methylation at enhancers in the absence of DOT-

1.1.   The elevation of endogenous dsRNA level is most likely responsible for the

apparent deficiency of *zfp-1* mutant worms in responding to exogenous dsRNA. Based

on these compelling observations, we propose that negative modulation of bidirectional

transcription at enhancers by DOT1L does not allow dsRNA levels to reach the

threshold required for inducing heterochromatin formation.

Results

ZFP-1 and DOT-1.1 are enriched at enhancers

Recently, the *C. elegans* genome was organized into 20 domains of different structure

and activity based on chromatin modification signatures (Evans et al. 2016). We

intersected coordinates of such domains with ZFP-1 ChIP-seq (third larval stage, L3)

and DOT-1.1 ChIP-chip (embryo) peaks to interrogate in which genomic regions the

ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 complex is most dominant. More than 40% of promoter regions

(domains 1 and 8 in embryos and domain 1 at L3) are enriched in ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 (Fig.

1A), in line with our previous observations of promoter-proximal binding of the complex

(Cecere et al. 2013). More interestingly, similar levels of enrichment are observed for

domains corresponding to predicted intronic (domain 8 at L3) and intergenic enhancers

(domain 9 in both embryos and L3 animals) (Fig. 1A,C). These domains have chromatin

signatures characteristic of enhancers, such as H3K4me1 and H3K27ac. In addition,

both promoters and enhancers are often devoid of nucleosomes and hence amenable

to be identified by techniques assessing open chromatin regions. A recent study has

identified such regions in *C. elegans* embryos and L3 animals by ATAC-seq. In this

study, approximately 5000 distal non-coding regions displayed dynamic changes in

chromatin accessibility between the two developmental stages. Also, several of these

putative enhancers revealed enhancer activity in transgenic reporter assays (Daugherty

et al. 2017). Interestingly, overlap analysis shows that both intragenic and distal ATAC-

seq peaks are enriched in DOT-1.1 and ZFP-1 in embryos and L3 animals, respectively

(Fig. 1B,C). These observations raise the exciting possibility that, in addition to the

previously disclosed role of ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 in the negative modulation of transcription

via promoter-proximal binding, this complex may also control transcription through

enhancers.

The ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 complex regulates distal and intragenic enhancer transcription

In light of the observation that enhancer elements in *C. elegans* are enriched in ZFP-

1/DOT-1.1, we have hypothesized that this complex could control enhancer

transcription. Distal enhancers often produce non-coding transcripts (eRNAs) which are

typically unstable and not represented in the steady-state transcript population (Li et al.

2016). This technical limitation may be circumvented by using techniques designed to

assess nascent transcription, such as the global run-on sequencing (GRO-seq) method

(Hah et al. 2013; Lam et al. 2013). GRO-seq data previously obtained in our lab were

instrumental in providing insight into the modulatory role of ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 in

transcription of genes targeted by the complex at promoter-proximal regions (Cecere et

al. 2013). We re-analyzed our published data to gain a comprehensive understanding of

the effect of ZFP-1/DOT1L on the regulatory genomic regions and chromatin domains

revealed by recent studies (Evans et al. 2016; Daugherty et al. 2017). Nascent

transcription is not limited to gene-directed transcription and is observed also at non-

coding regions of the genome, including enhancers (Supplemental Fig. S1A,B). We

quantified GRO-seq coverage at genomic domains characterized by unique chromatin

signatures and functional annotation (Evans et al. 2016) in wild-type (WT) and *zfp-1*

mutant (*zfp-1(ok554)*) L3 animals. In this mutant, ZFP-1 is C-terminally truncated and

does not interact with DOT-1.1, leading to decreased abundance of DOT-1.1 at

chromatin (Cecere et al. 2013). Interestingly, both intragenic and distal eRNAs were

globally increased in *zfp-1* mutant animals in comparison with WT larvae (Fig. 1D and

Supplemental Fig. S1B). Analysis of GRO-seq data at distal ATAC-seq peaks also

revealed a global increase in transcription *zfp-1* mutant animals compared with WT

larvae (Fig. 1E). These observations indicate that, in addition to negatively modulating

target gene transcription via promoter-proximal binding, the ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 complex

also regulates production of RNAs derived from both intragenic and distal enhancers.

Genes with enhancer signature bound by ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 display bidirectional

transcription upon loss of ZFP-1

Intragenic enhancer transcription has been suggested to interfere with host gene

transcription (Cinghu et al. 2017). In light of the elevation of intragenic enhancer

transcription observed in the *zfp-1* mutant, we have analyzed cumulative GRO-seq

coverage along gene bodies. Genes bound by ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 at the promoters were

not considered, since we have previously observed that these show increased GRO-

seq coverage in the *zfp-1* mutant compared with WT (Cecere et al. 2013). The

remaining genes in the assembly were considered to be either bound or not bound by

ZFP-1 at the coding regions. Both sense transcription and anti-sense transcription were

analyzed. Interestingly, transcriptional changes in the *zfp-1* mutant compared with WT

at target genes depended on the presence of enhancer chromatin signature. Genes

targeted by ZFP-1 and lacking enhancer signature displayed an overall decrease in

sense transcription (Fig. 2A, top panel) and no significant change in anti-sense

transcription (Fig. 2A, middle panel). However, those with enhancer signature showed a

significant increase in anti-sense transcription (Fig. 2A, middle panel, and Fig. 2B),

whereas sense transcription did not change significantly (Fig. 2A, top panel, and Fig.

2B).

We then compared changes in sense and anti-sense transcription assessed by GRO-

seq with mRNA expression assessed by microarray and, interestingly, genes targeted

by ZFP-1 at the coding region did not display an overall change in mRNA levels

between *zfp-1* mutant worms and WT animals (Fig. 2A, bottom panel). These

observations suggest a role for the ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 complex in preventing anti-sense

transcription at target genes with intragenic enhancer signatures.

Pervasive bidirectional transcription may result in double-stranded RNA (dsRNA)

formation from complementary base pairing of sense and anti-sense transcripts (Piatek

et al. 2016). We hypothesized that the increase in anti-sense transcription observed in

the *zfp-1* mutant could result in formation of dsRNA. To address this hypothesis, we

looked directly at the amount of dsRNA in *zfp-1* mutant worms by immunostaining with a

dsRNA-specific antibody previously employed to visualize dsRNA *in vivo* (Kaneko et al.

2011; Saldi et al. 2014). In agreement with our hypothesis, we have observed an

accumulation of nuclear dsRNA foci in *zfp-1* mutant worms, when compared with WT

(Fig. 2C).

Lethality of dot-1.1 knockout is suppressed by Dicer/RDE-4/RDE-1 pathway mutations

Our attempts to generate *dot-1.1* knockout mutants in the WT background by

CRISPR/Cas9 technology were not successful. Motivated by the implication of DOT1L

in apoptotic cell death (Nguyen et al. 2011; Feng et al. 2010), we have resorted to the

ced-3(n1286) mutant strain, which is defective in the pro-apoptotic caspase CED-3

(homologue of mammalian caspase-3) (Xue et al. 1996), and have successfully

generated a viable *dot-1.1(knu339)* null mutant in this mutant background (Fig. 3A).

Upon outcrossing the *ced-3(n1286)* allele, we found that a few surviving adult *dot-1.1*

null animals produced only developmentally arrested embryos and larvae. The arrested

larvae displayed numerous vacuoles typically seen in worms undergoing necrotic cell

death (Xu et al. 2001). Notably, the most pronounced effect was seen in the intestinal

cells that do not normally undergo programmed cell death (Fig. 3B). Therefore, DOT-1.1

does not simply suppress the initiation of programmed cell death in specific cells that

are destined to die.

We then hypothesized that the *dot-1.1(knu339)* lethality phenotype could be related to

the increase in dsRNA observed in *zfp-1* mutant worms. In *C. elegans* and other

organisms, exogenous dsRNA is subject to processing by the Dicer complex, which

cleaves it into small interfering RNAs (siRNAs) (Grishok 2005). In *C. elegans*, the first

discovered *R*NAi-*de*ficient mutants included *rde-1* and *rde-4* (Tabara et al. 1999). The

product of the *rde-1* gene is the Argonaute protein RDE-1, which binds primary siRNAs

produced by Dicer cleavage (Yigit et al. 2006), and the RDE-4 protein, which binds long

dsRNA and assists Dicer in the processing reaction (Tabara et al. 2002; Parker 2006).

The RDE-4 and RDE-1 proteins are also important for the anti-viral response (Wilkins et

al. 2005) and thought to have a limited role in endogenous RNAi. To determine if the

RDE-4/RDE-1 pathway responds to the ectopic dsRNA accumulation seen in the *zfp-1*

and *dot-1.1* mutants, we crossed the double *dot-1.1; ced-3* mutant strain with loss-of-

function mutants for *rde-4* and *rde-1*. Excitingly, the double *dot-1.1(knu339); rde-*

4(ne301) and *dot-1.1(knu339); rde-1(ne219)* mutant worms were homozygous viable

and did not require the presence of the *ced-3* mutant allele for the viability. In a control

experiment, we crossed the double *dot-1.1; ced-3* mutant strain with a mutant unrelated

to the Dicer/RDE-4/RDE-1 pathway and the lethality of *dot-1.1(knu339)* was not rescued

(Fig. 3C). These clear genetic results indicate that the lethality phenotype associated

with *dot-1.1* deletion is due to generation of ectopic small RNAs from excessive nuclear

dsRNA.

Excessive dsRNA resulting from loss of ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 competes for the Dicer complex

Genetic analyzes of RNAi in *C. elegans* initially identified genes regulating silencing in

response to exogenous dsRNA (exo-dsRNA), some of which were later found to

participate in endogenous RNAi as well (Grishok 2005; Lee 2006). Importantly, other

mutants in the endogenous RNAi ERI (Enhancer RNAi) pathway were found in screens

selecting for the increased response to exo-dsRNA (Simmer et al. 2002; Kennedy et al.

2004; Duchaine et al. 2006; Yigit et al. 2006). In the ERI pathway, the RNAi-initiating

dsRNA is generated by the RNA-dependent RNA polymerase RRF-3 at the select

endogenous loci, mostly representing duplicated genes (Gent et al. 2010; Fischer et al.

2013). This dsRNA is subject to Dicer processing and results in the generation of

primary siRNAs bound by the ERGO-1 Argonaute (Vasale et al. 2010; Yigit et al. 2006).

The ERI-1 protein and RRF-3 both interact with Dicer and act upstream of ERGO-1 in

the ERI pathway. Thus, the ERI/ERGO-1 and the exo-RNAi/RDE-1 pathways compete

for the Dicer complex. We hypothesized that, upon loss of DOT-1.1 or ZFP-1, another

pool of endogenous dsRNA (in addition to the RRF-3-produced) is competing with exo-

RNAi, and efficiency of the latter is reduced as a result of this competition. To test this

hypothesis, we used an *elt-2::GFP/lacZ* transgene-based (Fukushige et al. 1999)

model. The *elt-2::GFP/lacZ* transgenic strain contains a repetitive transgenic array

prone to silencing through the Dicer/RDE-4/RDE-1 pathway (Grishok et al. 2005). This

transgene is exclusively expressed in the nuclei of intestinal cells and shows partial

silencing at 16°C in the WT background and complete silencing in ERI pathway mutants

(Grishok et al. 2005), such as *eri-1(mg366)* (Fig. 4A). On the contrary, in *zfp-1(ok554)*

(not shown) or *dot-1.1(gk520244)* partial loss-of-function mutant backgrounds, it is

readily apparent that transgenic expression is increased compared to WT (Fig. 4A).

Importantly, the level of GFP expression in the double mutant *dot-1.1; eri-1* remains low,

similar to that of *eri-1* alone (Fig. 4A). This result indicates that the effect of *dot-1.1*

mutation (i.e. transgene de-silencing) is suppressed by the loss of ERI-1 working

together with Dicer. In other words: DOT-1.1 acts upstream of ERI-1/Dicer. This result is

not consistent with the long-standing belief that ZFP-1 induces RNAi in the nucleus in

response to siRNAs produced by Dicer. However, it completely supports our hypothesis

about the mechanism of the apparent RNAi-promoting function of ZFP-1 and DOT-1.1.

In summary, our results demonstrate that, upon loss of ZFP-1/DOT-1.1, in addition to

the dsRNA generated through the ERI pathway and the dsRNA produced from

transgenes, the dsRNA produced from endogenous loci enters in the competition for the

Dicer complex (Fig. 4B and Fig. 6). Our data strongly suggest that this competition

occurs in the nucleus.

Loss of DOT-1.1 results in ectopic heterochromatin at distal and intragenic enhancers

DOT1L activity has been shown to restrict the spreading of factors associated with

heterochromatin in yeast and leukemia cell lines (Ng et al. 2002; Katan-Khaykovich and

Struhl 2005; Chen et al. 2015). On the other hand, siRNAs direct Argonaute proteins to

complementary nascent transcripts to initiate H3K9 methylation, resulting in

heterochromatin formation (Ni et al. 2014; Grewal and Elgin 2007). We reasoned that

these two distinct phenomena could be put together in the context of the regulation of

enhancer transcription by ZFP-1/DOT-1.1. Consistently, histone H3 lysine 9

dimethylation (H3K9me2), a hallmark of heterochromatin, is increased in both intragenic

and distal enhancer domains in *dot-1.1; ced-3* animals compared to *ced-3* animals (Fig.

5A and Supplemental S2A). In addition, genes containing enhancer signatures have

increased H3K9me2 in *dot-1.1; ced-3* animals (Fig. 5B and Supplemental S2B).

Overall, our results demonstrate that DOT1L activity prevents both dsRNA production

and heterochromatin formation at enhancer elements in *C. elegans*.

Discussion

In the past few years, genomic and transcriptomic data from high-throughput

sequencing studies have been shedding light on the importance of non-coding genomic

regulatory regions, including enhancers. These are typically demarcated by certain

characteristics, such as prevalence of the H3K4me1 and H3K27ac marks and open

chromatin configuration, and these features have been extensively used to predict their

coordinates in a variety of organisms. Importantly, exciting new observations point to

the remarkable similarity between enhancers and promoters in terms of chromatin

architecture and transcriptional profile, challenging traditional binary views of enhancers

and promoters (Rennie et al. 2017; Henriques et al. 2018; Mikhaylichenko et al. 2018).

As these notions become dimmer, an interesting view gaining momentum is that some

enhancers can act as weak promoters, while, conversely, bidirectional promoters often

act as strong enhancers. This plasticity of enhancer and promoter activities is

manifested in the levels and directionality of transcription (Mikhaylichenko et al. 2018).

In the face of this shifting paradigm, it is reasonable to believe that the commonalities

between enhancers and promoters may extend to how their transcriptional output is

controlled by the epigenetic machinery of the cell, including molecular writers such as

histone methyltransferases and histone acetyltransferases. We had previously

demonstrated that ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 exert a negative modulatory role on transcription of

genes with promoter-proximal binding of the complex (Cecere et al. 2013). These are

mostly highly and widely expressed genes not subject to spatiotemporal regulation.

Here, we present tantalizing evidence that the DOT1L complex also modulates

enhancer-directed transcription in a mechanism that likely partakes on the regulation of

genes subject to tissue and time-specific control of expression, ensuring the fidelity of

developmental programs. Of note, DOT1L has been implicated in processes as diverse

as embryonic and postnatal hematopoiesis, proliferation of mouse embryonic stem

cells, induced and natural reprogramming, cardiac development and chondrogenesis

(McLean et al. 2014), and the regulation of these processes is greatly contributed by

enhancer activity. Therefore, it is possible that DOT1L assists promoter-enhancer

cooperativity at key developmental transitions. Also, perturbation of enhancer activity is

increasingly being recognized as an important player in malignant transformation (Sur

and Taipale 2016). Recently, chimeric oncoproteins MLL-AF9 and MLL-AF4 were found

to bind specific subsets of non-overlapping active distal enhancers in acute myeloid

leukemia cell lines. Interestingly, in this study, MLL-AF9-bound enhancers displayed

higher levels of H3K79me2 than enhancers bound by the MLL protein alone (Prange et

al. 2017). This observation can be explained by the fact that AF9, similarly to AF10, is a

frequent binding partner of DOT1L and drives its localization to chromatin (Kuntimaddi

et al. 2015). Therefore, it is possible that, in MLL-driven leukemias, inappropriate

recruitment of DOT1L to distal regulatory elements perturbs their transcriptional output.

In addition, homeobox loci with an indisputable role in malignant transformation, such as

HOXA9 and *MEIS1*, display both coding and non-coding transcription, including anti-

sense transcripts (Popovic et al. 2008; Sessa et al. 2006), and DOT1L activity may play

a yet unappreciated role in the control of such transcripts. In fact, our observations

suggest that DOT1L controls anti-sense transcription, particularly at genes

characterized by presence of enhancer signature. Interestingly, a sequence conserved

in vertebrate *Hox* gene introns was reported to function as an enhancer element in

Drosophila (Keegan et al. 1997; Haerry and Gehring 1996). In addition, the c-*myc*

(Nepveu and Marcu 1986) and N-*myc* (Krystal et al. 1990) oncogenic loci display anti-

sense transcription, and exciting new findings point to the implication of DOT1L in

cancers underlain by c-Myc and N-Myc activation, particularly breast cancer (Cho et al.

2015) and neuroblastoma (Wong et al. 2017). Also, the contribution of anti-sense

transcription to malignant transformation has been gaining attention in the past few

years (Wenric et al. 2017; Balbin et al. 2015). Therefore, the enticing implications of our

observations on the *C. elegans* DOT1L homologue call for the role of anti-sense and

non-coding transcription in cancer to be appreciated in the context of DOT1L activity.

Our analysis of GRO-seq data revealed an increase in anti-sense transcription upon

loss of ZFP-1/DOT-1.1, particularly at genes with enhancer signatures, implying

overlapping bidirectional transcription and formation of sense-antisense dsRNA

structures. This inference was reinforced by the clear observation of dsRNA foci in the

nucleus of *zfp-1* mutant worms, indicating accumulation of dsRNA. Formation of dsRNA

is a common feature of multiple gene suppression phenomena known collectively as

RNAi, which may be endogenous or exogenous. Importantly, production of both

endogenous (endo-siRNAs) and exogenous (exo-siRNAs) small interfering RNAs

requires the activity of DCR-1/Dicer. Our observations demonstrate that endogenous

dsRNA resulting from loss of ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 competes with exogenously introduced

dsRNA for DCR-1/RDE-4/RDE-1-mediated processing into small RNAs. This

competition can explain the implication of ZFP-1 in RNAi (Grishok et al. 2005; Kim et al.

2005; Dudley et al. 2002). Also, lethality of *dot-1.1* deletion is suppressed by

Dicer/RDE-4/RDE-1 pathway mutations, showing that endogenous small RNA

generation is involved in the lethality phenotype. It is well known that exo-dsRNA

induces apoptosis in a variety of mammalian systems (Estornes et al. 2012; Yamane et

al. 2006; Kalai et al. 2002). Our observations uncover an interesting phenomenon

whereby ectopically formed endogenous dsRNA, and not exo-dsRNA, causes cell

death. To the best of our knowledge, this finding is unprecedented and lays ground for

further research.

A further implication of our observations lies at the crosstalk between H3K79

methylation and H3K9 methylation. Knowledge of this crosstalk was pioneered by work

in yeast (Katan-Khaykovich and Struhl 2005; Ng et al. 2002) and later placed in the

context of MLL-driven leukemias (Chen et al. 2015). We have observed that H3K9me2,

a hallmark of heterochromatin, is elevated at enhancer regions upon loss of ZFP-

1/DOT-1.1. Therefore, DOT1L may prevent the encroachment of heterochromatin to

enhancers.

In summary, the compelling observations disclosed here bring together various aspects

of DOT1L function (Fig. 6). In addition to controlling transcription through promoters, as

previously described (Cecere et al. 2013), DOT1L activity controls enhancer-directed

transcription. This finding may attest to the novel concept of the fluidity of

enhancer/promoter states. Furthermore, we have linked DOT1L-mediated

transcriptional control to dsRNA formation and small RNA generation, as well as to

heterochromatin formation, specifically at enhancer regions. Whereas this study

connects DOT1L and the RNAi factors required for production of siRNAs from dsRNA

genetically, we describe the identification of small RNAs matching enhancers in another

publication (Gushchanskaia et al. 2018).

Materials and methods

Strains

Strains were maintained at 20°C under standard conditions (Brenner 1974). Bristol N2

was the WT strain used. The following mutant strains were obtained from the

Caenorhabditis Genetics Center (CGC): VC40220, containing *dot-1.1(gk520244)* I,

RB774 – *zfp-1(ok554)* III, WM49 – *rde-4(ne301)* III, VC20787, containing *mml-*

1(gk402844) III, GR1373 – *eri-1(mg366)* IV, MT3002 – *ced-3(n1286)* IV, WM27 – *rde-*

1(ne219) V. The RB and VC strains were provided by the *C. elegans* Gene Knockout

Project at the Oklahoma Medical Research Foundation and by the *C. elegans* Reverse

Genetics Core Facility at the University of British Columbia, respectively, which were

part of the International *C. elegans* Gene Knockout Consortium. Mutations of interest

were outcrossed four times and the following derivative strains were obtained: AGK760

– *mml-1(gk402844)* III, AGK768 – *dot-1.1(gk520244)* I. The *rtIs11 (elt-2P::GFP/LacZ)* X

transgenic strain was a gift from Dr. Anne Hart. The *dot-1.1* null mutant (strain

COP1302 – *dot-1.1 [knu339 - (pNU1092 - KO loxP::hygR::loxP)]* I; *ced-3 (n1286)* IV), in

which exons one to four in the *dot1.1* gene locus were deleted, was generated using a

proprietary protocol by Knudra Transgenics. The following derivative strains were

produced in this study:

AGK779 – *dot-1.1(gk520244)* I; *rtIs11 (elt-2P::GFP/LacZ)* X

AGK780 – *eri-1(mg366)* IV; *rtIs11 (elt-2P::GFP/LacZ)* X

AGK781 – *dot-1.1(gk520244)* I; *eri-1(mg366)* IV; *rtIs11 (elt-2P::GFP/LacZ)* X

AGK782 – *dot-1.1 [knu339 - (pNU1092 - KO loxP::hygR::loxP)]* I; *rde-4(ne301)* III

AGK783 – *dot-1.1 [knu339 - (pNU1092 - KO loxP::hygR::loxP)]* I; *rde-1(ne219)* V

Microscopy and immunofluorescence

The *elt-2P::GFP/LacZ* transgenic strains were grown at 16°C for at least two

generations without starvation before imaging. Live animals were mounted on 2%

agarose pads and examined using the Zeiss AxioImager Z1 instrument. The same

exposure times were used for capturing images and comparing GFP expression in

different strains.

For immunofluorescence, young adult worms were handpicked and placed in M9

solution supplemented with 0.01% Tween and 25 mM sodium azide on a slide. Worms

were dissected using scalpel and fixed with 2% paraformaldehyde for 1 h at room

temperature and post-fixed in ice-cold methanol for 5 minutes. Control worms were

treated with RNase A prior to fixation at 37°C for 30 minutes to confirm the antibody

specificity, and then washed 3 times with M9. After fixation, worms were transferred to

glass tubes and blocked with 1% bovin serum albumin (BSA) in M9 supplemented with

0.05% Tween-20. Blocked samples were then incubated with the J2 antibody (1:1000)

(a generous gift of Dr. Elke Mühlberger, National Emerging Infectious Diseases

Laboratories) overnight at 4°C, washed 3 times in washing buffer (BSA 0.25%, Tween-

20 0.05% in M9) and then incubated with secondary fluorophore-conjugated (AF 568)

antibody (1:500) for 2 h in the dark. After 3 washes, the samples were transferred to a

slide and mounted with DAPI-containing solution (Invitrogen, Prolong Diamond Antifade

Mountant with DAPI). The images were taken at 63X on a Zeiss AxioImager Z1

instrument and processed with ImageJ (version 1.51k).

Chromatin immunoprecipitation and library preparation

Hypochlorite-synchronized L1 stage WT or mutant animals were grown for 36 hours

post-hatching at 20ºC on standard NGM plates with OP-50 *E. coli*. Synchronized L3

larvae were then washed off the plates using isotonic M9 solution. Fixation was

performed for 30 min at 20°C in crosslinking solution (2% paraformaldehyde in M9

buffer), and excess formaldehyde was quenched with 0.1 M Tris-HCl pH 7.5. The pellet

was then washed twice with M9 buffer at 4°C. The worm pellet was resuspended in 1

mL ice-cold RIPA buffer (10 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.0, 0.1% SDS, 1% Triton X-100, 0.1%

sodium deoxycholate, 1 mM EDTA, 0.15 M NaCl) supplemented with Halt™ Protease

Inhibitor Cocktail (Thermo Fisher Scientific). The suspension was then transferred to a

Covaris milliTUBE 1 mL with AFA® fiber and shearing was performed using the

following settings in SonoLab7: Peak Incident Power (PIP) = 240W; Duty Factor = 20%;

Cycles per burst (cpb) = 200; time = 480 seconds. After shearing, the crude extract was

spun for 10 min at 10,000 x *g* and the supernatant was collected. Protein concentration

was determined by the Bradford method. Extract corresponding to 1 mg protein was

diluted to 500 µl with ice-cold RIPA buffer supplemented with Halt™ Protease Inhibitor

Cocktail (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Antibody specific for H3K9me2 (Abcam, ab1220, 5

µg) was added and, after incubation at 4°C for 1 h, 50 µl of Dynabeads™ Protein G

suspension (Thermo Fisher Scientific) were added and the mixture was incubated at

4°C for 1 h on rotation. Beads were recovered with a Dynal® Magnetic Particle

Concentrator (Invitrogen) and washed at 4°C with: 0.5 mL buffer TSE-150 (0.1% SDS,

1% Triton X-100, 2 mM EDTA, 20 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.1, 150 mM NaCl), 2 X 0.5 mL

buffer TSE-500 (0.1% SDS, 1% Triton X-100, 2 mM EDTA, 20 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.1, 500

mM NaCl), 0.5 mL buffer TSE-1M (0.1% SDS, 1% Triton X-100, 2 mM EDTA, 20 mM

Tris-HCl pH 8.1, 1 M NaCl), 0.5 mL buffer LiCl (250 mM LiCl, 1% NP40, 1%

deoxycholate, 1 mM EDTA, 10 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.1), 2 X 0.5 mL buffer TE (10 mM Tris

pH 8.0, 1 mM EDTA). Antibody-bound chromatin was recovered in 2 X 0.2 mL elution

buffer (1% SDS, 0.1 M NaHCO3) by shaking at room temperature for 15 min. Elution

buffer was added to input samples (5%) to a total volume of 0.4 mL. Input and ChIP

chromatin samples were subsequently processed in parallel. After 20 µl of 5 M NaCl

was added to each sample, cross-links were reversed overnight at 65°C. 10 µl of 0.5 M

EDTA, 20 µl of 1 M Tris-HCl pH 6.5 and 0.5 µl of 20 mg/mL Proteinase K (Thermo

Fisher Scientific) were added and each sample was incubated for 1 h at 42°C. DNA was

recovered using the QIAquick PCR Purification Kit (Qiagen) in accordance with the

manufacturer's instructions. The immunoprecipitated DNA was either quantified by

qPCR to calculate the percentage of immunoprecipitation relative to the input, or

subjected to library preparation and high-throughput sequencing. Immunoprecipitated

DNA and input libraries were prepared using TruSeq ChIP Library Preparation kit

following the manufacturer's instructions (Illumina) and checked for concentration and

quality on DNA chips with a Bioanalyzer (Agilent). 75-bp single read sequences were

generated on the NextSeq 500 sequencer according to manufacturer's instructions

(Illumina).

RNA extraction and expression profiling

Synchronized L3 larvae were washed off the plates using isotonic M9 solution. RNA

was isolated in triplicate for each mutant strain using TRIzol (Invitrogen) followed by

miRNeasy mini column (Qiagen). RNA integrity was confirmed using a 2100

Bioanalyzer (Agilent Technologies). Samples were labeled and hybridized to Affymetrix

GeneChip™ *C. elegans* Gene 1.0 ST arrays. Raw Affymetrix CEL files were normalized

to produce gene-level expression values using the Robust Multiarray Average (RMA)

(Irizarry et al. 2012) in Affymetrix Expression Console (version 1.4.1.46). The default

probesets defined by Affymetrix were used to assess array quality using the Area Under

the [Receiver Operating Characteristics] Curve (AUC) metric. Principal Component

Analysis (PCA) was performed using the *prcomp* R function with expression values that

had been normalized across all samples to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of

one. Differential expression was assessed using the moderated (empirical Bayesian)

ANOVA and *t* test implemented in the *limma* package (version 3.14.4) (i.e., creating

simple linear models with *lmFit*, followed by empirical Bayesian adjustment with

eBayes). Correction for multiple hypothesis testing was accomplished using the

Benjamini-Hochberg false discovery rate (FDR) (Benjamini and Hochberg 1995). All

microarray analyses were performed using the R environment for statistical computing

(version 2.15.1).

Analysis of chromatin domains and ATAC-seq peaks

Coordinates of chromatin domains were obtained from Evans et al., 2016. DOT-1.1

ChIP-chip and ZFP-1 ChIP-seq peak coordinates were obtained from modENCODE

(modENCODE_2970 and modENCODE_6213, respectively). A chromatin domain

region was called bound by DOT-1.1 or by ZFP-1 if the center base pair of at least one

peak was located within the coordinates of the region. Putative enhancer regions were

obtained by combining coordinates of domains 8, 9 and 10. Enhancer domains at least

1500 bp distal to any annotated transcription start site or transcription termination site

were considered distal enhancer domains. Enhancer domains intersecting coordinates

of genes < 15kb by at least 50 bp were considered intragenic enhancer domains.

ATAC-seq peak coordinates (Daugherty et al. 2017) were downloaded from the NCBI

GEO database (GSE89608). Distal and intragenic ATAC-seq peaks were obtained as

for enhancer domains. Intersections of genomic intervals were performed in R using the

valr package (A. Riemondy et al. 2017).

Analysis of GRO-seq data

GRO-seq data was obtained from the NCBI GEO database (GSE47132) and the reads

were mapped to the *C. elegans* genome (ce10 assembly) using ChIPdig, a software

application to analyze ChIP-seq data (Esse and Grishok 2017). Then, reads matching

ribosomal RNA loci were removed, as described before (Cecere et al. 2013). Read

counting in regions (either genes, regions or genomic bins) was performed with

package GenomicAlignments (Lawrence et al. 2013); only reads with mapping quality

20 or higher were included in subsequent analyses. Regions without reads across the

sample set were removed. Counts were then normalized using the TMM method, which

takes RNA composition bias into account (Robinson and Oshlack 2010), using the

edgeR package (Robinson et al. 2010). Coverage was expressed as RPKM (reads per

kilobase per million mapped) and log2-transformed.

Analysis of ChIP-seq data

Analysis of ChIP-seq data was performed as described for the analysis of GRO-seq

data, with the exception that, after normalization of read counts, coverage was

expressed as the log2-transformed ratio of the RPKM value in the immunoprecipitated

DNA sample divided by the RPKM value in the non-immunoprecipitated (input) DNA.

Only regions in which the normalized count value in the immunoprecipitated DNA

sample was higher than that in the corresponding input DNA in at least one sample in

the set were considered.

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Figure Legends

Figure 1. ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 negatively modulate enhancer-directed transcription. (*A*)

Overlap analysis showing that promoters and enhancer chromatin domains are

enriched in ZFP-1/DOT-1.1. DOT-1.1 ChIP-chip and ZFP-1 ChIP-seq peak coordinates

were obtained from modENCODE (modENCODE_2970 and modENCODE_6213,

respectively). Chromatin domain coordinates were obtained by hidden Markov models

(Evans et al. 2016). Data are presented as percentage of regions enriched in DOT-1.1

or ZFP-1 in each of the 20 chromatin domains described for embryos and for third larval

stage animals, respectively. A chromatin domain region was called bound by DOT-1.1

or ZFP-1 if the center base pair of at least one peak was located within the coordinates

of the region. Domains 1 and 8 at the embryonic stage, as well as domain 1 at the third

larval stage (L3), were annotated as promoter regions. Domain 8 at L3 and domain 9 in

both embryos and L3 correspond to predicted intronic and intergenic enhancers,

respectively (Evans et al. 2016). (*B*) Intragenic and distal ATAC-seq peaks in embryos

and L3 animals are enriched in DOT-1.1 and ZFP-1, respectively. *C. elegans* gene

coordinates (WS220/ce10) were extracted from the UCSC genome browser and

intersected with ATAC-seq peak coordinates (Daugherty et al. 2017). Peaks at least

1500 bp distal to any annotated transcription start site or transcription termination site

were considered distal ATAC-seq peaks. Peaks intersecting coordinates of genes <

15kb by at least 50 bp were considered intragenic ATAC-seq peaks. (*C*) UCSC genome

browser snapshots showing representative examples of overlap of ZFP-1 with distal

enhancer domains and ATAC-seq peaks (left) and with intragenic enhancer domains

(right). (*D*) Transcription originating from intragenic and distal enhancers predicted by

chromatin modification signatures (Evans et al. 2016) is elevated in *zfp-1* mutant

animals compared with WT larvae (left). GRO-seq coverage was normalized using 250

bp bins spanning the genome. The P-value was determined by Mann-Whitney U test

(enhancers versus genomic bins). Representative examples are shown in the UCSC

genome browser multi-region snapshot (right). Each highlighted genomic region

corresponds to a distal enhancer domain. (*E*) Transcription originating from distal

enhancers corresponding to open chromatin regions (Daugherty et al. 2017) is elevated

in *zfp-1* mutant animals compared with WT larvae (left). GRO-seq coverage

normalization and statistical tests were performed as in (D). Representative examples

are shown in the UCSC genome browser multi-region snapshot (right). Each highlighted

region corresponds to a distal ATAC-seq peak.

Figure 2. ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 prevent double-stranded RNA formation at target genes with

intragenic enhancers. (*A*) Anti-sense transcription at ZFP-1 target genes with intragenic

enhancer signature is increased in *zfp-1* mutant animals compared with WT larvae,

whereas sense transcription does not change. The corresponding steady-state mRNA

population does not overall change significantly between *zfp-1* mutant worms and WT

animals. ** and *** denote P-values < 0.01 and < 0.001, respectively, as determined by

Mann-Whitney U test (each category of genes versus all genes). Genes with promoter-

bound ZFP-1 were not included in this analysis. (*B*) UCSC genome browser multi-region

snapshot showing representative examples of increase of anti-sense transcription at

ZFP-1 gene targets with enhancer signature in *zfp-1* mutant animals (orange) compared

with WT larvae (gray). Each highlighted region corresponds to a gene. (*C*) Double-

stranded RNA (dsRNA) accumulates in *zfp-1* mutant animals. Fixed, isolated intestinal

tissue was probed with anti-dsRNA antibody (J2) recognizing stretches of 40 bp or more

in a sequence-independent manner. Stained inclusions (red) were detected in intestinal

nuclei (blue, DAPI counterstain) and were increased in *zfp-1* mutant animals compared

with WT larvae. Scale bar (in red, upper left panel): 50 μm.

Figure 3. Lethality of *dot-1.1* knockout is suppressed by Dicer/RDE-4/RDE-1 pathway

mutations. (*A*) (left) Western blot with the anti-DOT-1.1 antibody (Cecere et al. 2013)

detects DOT-1.1 in the control strain, but not in *dot-1.1(knu339)*. (right) The *dot-1.1;*

ced-3 mutant displays global loss of H3K79me2 as assessed by Western blotting, in

agreement with the function of DOT-1.1 in catalyzing H3K79 methylation. (*B*)

Outcrossing the *ced-3(n1286)* allele from the *dot-1.1; ced-3* mutant results in arrested

development, cell death. Note the numerous vacuoles typical of necrotic cell death in

C. elegans. (*C*) Mutations in *rde-4* and *rde-1*, both affecting primary siRNA production

and function, rescue the lethality phenotype associated with knockout of the *dot-1.1*

locus.

Figure 4. Ectopic endogenous dsRNA formed upon loss of ZFP-1/DOT-1.1 titrates the

Dicer complex away from exogenous dsRNA. (*A*) In *dot-1.1(gk520244)* partial loss-of-

function mutant worms, expression of the *elt-2::*GFP*/lacZ* transgene is increased

compared with WT animals, indicating reduced efficiency of silencing by exogenously

introduced dsRNA. The level of GFP expression in *dot-1.1; eri-1* mutant worms is

similar to that observed in *eri-1* mutant worms, showing that DOT-1.1 acts upstream of

ERI-1/Dicer. Scale bar (in white, upper left panel): 200 μm. (*B*) Different pools of dsRNA

compete for the Dicer/RDE-4/RDE-1 pathway, including ectopic dsRNA produced

endogenously. The latter is exacerbated upon loss of ZFP-1/DOT-1.1.

Figure 5. Distal and intragenic enhancers show ectopic heterochromatin upon loss of

DOT-1.1. (*A*) Distal and intragenic enhancers predicted by chromatin enhancer

signatures display ectopic H3K9me2 in the *dot-1.1; ced-3* mutant compared with *ced-3*

animals. The P-value was determined by Mann-Whitney U test (enhancers versus

genomic bins). (right) Representative examples are shown in the UCSC genome

browser; each highlighted region corresponds to a distal enhancer domain. (*B*)

H3K9me2 is elevated at genes with enhancer signature in the *dot-1.1; ced-3* mutant

compared with *ced-3* animals. The P-value was determined by Mann-Whitney U test

(*dot-1.1; ced-3* versus *ced-3*). (right) Representative examples are shown in the UCSC

genome browser; each highlighted region corresponds to an intragenic enhancer

domain.

Figure 6. Mechanism of initiation of nuclear RNAi upon loss of DOT1L. Loss of ZFP-

1/DOT1L leads to increase in anti-sense transcription, resulting in accumulation of

endogenous dsRNA molecules. These are processed by the Dicer complex into endo-

siRNAs, ultimately leading to H3K9 methylation and heterochromatin formation.

Generation of this new pool of dsRNA attracts the dsRNA-binding RNAi pathway protein

RDE-4 and Dicer, thus limiting the efficiency of exogenous dsRNA-induced silencing.

Supplemental Figure S1. Nascent transcription is negatively regulated by the ZFP-

1/DOT-1.1 complex. (*A*) Transcription originating from intragenic and distal enhancers

predicted by chromatin modification domains 8, 9 and 10 (Evans et al. 2016) comprises

approximately 12% of total nascent transcription observed in WT animals, as assessed

by GRO-seq (Cecere et al. 2013). (*B*) Nascent transcription is increased in *zfp-1* mutant

animals compared with WT larvae not only at promoter-proximal regions and gene

bodies represented by domains 1, 2 and 3, as previously reported (Cecere et al. 2013),

but also at chromatin enhancer domains 8, 9 and 10. The P-value was determined by

Mann-Whitney U test (*zfp-1* versus WT). * and *** denote P-values < 0.05 and < 0.001,

respectively.

Supplemental Figure S2. ChIP-seq Analysis of H3K9me2 on Independently Obtained

Replicas Shows Ectopic Heterochromatin Formation at Enhancers upon Loss of DOT-

1.1. (*A*) Ectopic H3K9me2 at enhancer domains in the *dot-1.1; ced-3* mutant compared

with *ced-3* animals in two independent experiments. The P-value was determined by

Mann-Whitney U test (enhancers versus genomic bins). (*B*) Increased H3K9me2 at

genes with enhancer signature in the *dot-1.1; ced-3* mutant compared with *ced-3*

animals in the two independent experiments performed. The P-value was determined by

Mann-Whitney U test (*dot-1.1; ced-3* versus *ced-3*).

A Log2 FC *zfp-1* vs WT

GRO-seq sense

GRO-seq anti-sense

Microarray mRNA

all genes

Gene

Z ZFP-1 binding (coding region)

E Intragenic enhancer

B ZFP-1-bound genes with **Esse_Fig2** enhancer signature

Scale 10 kb ce10
chrV: 20,920,000 20,920,000

GRO-seq coverage WT (anti-sense)

GRO-seq coverage WT (sense)

GRO-seq coverage *zfp-1* (anti-sense)

GRO-seq coverage *zfp-1* (sense)

Genes

C WT WT *zfp-1* *zfp-1*

IF

DAPI

Merge

A

ced-3   *ced-3; dot-1.1*

WB: DOT-1.1

WB: actin

ced-3   *ced-3; dot-1.1*

WB: H3K79me2

WB: H3(PAN)

WB: actin

B *dot-1.1(-); ced-3(+)* arrested larva resulting from *ced-3(-)* outcrossing   **Esse_Fig3**

C

Results of *dot-1.1* outcrosses from *ced-3* background

Mutant crossed	F2 picked (N)	Homozygous viable *dot-1.1* F2 lines			
		WT background	*ced-3* status	Mutant background	*ced-3* status
mml-1(gk402844)	21	2	2/2 (-)	3	3/3 (-)
rde-4(ne301)	40	0	n/a	5	2/5 (-) 3/5 (+)
*rde-1(ne219)**	10	n/a	n/a	4	1/4 (-) 3/4 (+)

* Mutant F2 animals were pre-selected

Esse_Fig4

A

DIC | 220 ms

WT
elt-2::GFP

dot-1.1
elt-2::GFP

2500 ms

eri-1
elt-2::GFP

dot-1.1; eri-1
elt-2::GFP

B

elt-2:: GFP background	Competing dsRNA pools		
	Repetitive transgenes	ERI pathway-produced	Ectopic endogenous
WT	+	+	-
eri-1	+	-	-
dot-1.1	+	+	+
eri-1; dot-1.1	+	-	+

Esse_Fig5

A

Chromatin Domain	Description
7	Txn elongation V: introns and repeats
12	Repeats, low expr introns, AT rich
6	Txn elongation IV low expression and repeats
15	Repeats, RNA pseudogenes, H3K9me2
3	Txn elongation I: exon
16	Intergenic, silent genes, piRNAs and repeats
1	Promoter
5	Txn elongtion III: exon and gene end
2	5' proximal and gene body
4	Txn elongation II: exon and intron
8	Enhancer I: intronic
9	Enhancer II: intergenic
13	Retrotransposons, pseudogenes, H3K9me3, H3K27me3
11	Border
10	Enhancer II: weak
14	Mixed, tissue specific
18	Pc/H3K27me3 II: low expr/silent
19	Pc/H3K27me3 III: low expr/silent, gene body
17	Pc/H3K27me3 III: low expr/silent and pseudogenes
20	H3K9me3 and H3K27me3: silent genes and pseudogenes

% of total coverage

B

GRO-seq RPKM (log2)

Chromatin Domains

WT
zfp-1

A

Replicate 1

Replicate 2

Cumulative Frequency

Genomic bins
Distal
P-value = 3.2e-07
Intragenic
P-value < 2e-16

Genomic bins
Distal
P-value = 0.00012
Intragenic
P-value = 1.3e-14

H3K9me2 ChIP-seq Log2 FC *dot-1.1;ced-3* vs *ced-3*

B

Replicate 1

Replicate 2

H3K9me2 ChIP-seq RPKM (log2)

ced-3
dot-1.1;ced-3

P-val < 2.2e-16

P-val < 2.2e-16

P-val < 2.2e-16

P-val < 2.2e-16

(+) enhancer   (-) enhancer

(+) enhancer   (-) enhancer