p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ activation is an important factor for the ERK pathway dependent anti-proliferation of colorectal cancer cells

Ki-Sook Park[1], Soung Hoo Jeon[1], Jong-Won Oh[1] and Kang-Yell Choi[1,2,3]

[1]Department of Biotechnology
[2]Protein Network Research Center
Yonsei University, Seoul 120-752, Korea
[3]Corresponding author: Tel, 82-2-2123-2887;
Fax, 82-2-362-7265; E-mail, kychoi@yonsei.ac.kr

Abstract

p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$, an important regulator of cell proliferation, is induced by both p53- and extracellular signal regulated kinase (ERK) pathways. The induction of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ occurs by prolonged activation of the ERKs caused by extracellular stimuli, such as zinc. However, not all the cells appeared to respond to ERK pathway dependent p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction. Here we investigated the cause of such difference using colorectal cancer cells. p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction and concomitant reduction of bromodeoxyuridine (BrdU) incorporation were observed by zinc treatment within HT-29 and DLD-1. However, HCT-116 cells with high endogenous p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ levels did not show any additional increment of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ levels by zinc treatment and did maintain high BrdU incorporation level. The p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction by zinc depended upon prolonged activation of extracellular signal regulated kinase (ERK) was not observed in HCT-116 cells. The percentage of BrdU positive cells was 50% higher in p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ -/- HCT-116 cells compared to p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ +/+ HCT-116 cells, and no cells induced p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ incorporated BrdU in its nucleus, yet confirming the importance of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction in anti-proliferation. These results again support that p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction is a determinant in the regulation of colonic proliferation by the ERK pathway.

Introduction

p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ is an important cell cycle regulator that is induced by activation of both p53 and the extracellular signal regulated kinase (ERK) pathways (reviewed in Kerkhoff and Rapp, 1998). p53-independent induction of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ is acquired by activation of the ERK pathway involving activation of the Raf-1-MEK-ERK cascade (Liu et al., 1996; Sewing et al., 1997; Woods et al., 1997; Mahyar-Roemer and Roemer, 2001; Park et al., 2002). The inducers that can activate p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ via activation of the ERK pathway include zinc (Park et al., 2002; 2003), sulindac (Yip-Schneider and Schmidt, 2003), troglytazone (TRO) (Kim et al., 2002), calmodulin inhibitor W13 (Bosch et al., 1998), and butyrate (Archer et al., 1998; Derjuga et al., 2001). The ERK pathway is involved in growth arrest (Liu et al., 1996; Sewing et al., 1997; Woods et al., 1997; Mahyar-Roemer and Roemer, 2001; Park et al., 2002; Boucher et al., 2004) as well as its well known function of growth stimulation (Blenis, 1993; Chang et al., 2003). Activation of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$, represented by induction and nuclear localization, is an important marker for anti-proliferation and growth arrest that occurs by prolonged activation of the ERK pathway (Nakano et al., 1997; Archer et al., 1998; Kim et al., 2002; Park et al., 2002; 2003; Eum et al., 2003). On the other hand, p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ was not induced by the transient and weak ERK activation that is associated with proliferation (Sewing et al., 1997; Woods et al., 1997; Park et al., 2002). The differential activation of ERK that is related to different growth behaviors relies on signaling intensity and the serum concentration (Park et al., 2003). Induction of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ is an important indicator for anti-proliferation in colorectal cancer cells (Nakano et al., 1997; Archer et al., 1998; Kim et al., 2002; Park et al., 2002). Percentages of cells incorporating BrdU were significantly reduced by zinc or TRO inducing p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ (Kim et al., 2002; Park et al., 2002).

In previous studies, we identified that p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction is a marker for ERK pathway dependent anti-proliferation due to extracellular zinc in HT-29 colorectal cancer cells (Oh et al., 2002; Park et al., 2002). However, we did not observe the zinc effect of anti-proliferation in other cell type, HCT-116. There-

fore, we investigated cell type specificity in regulation of colonic proliferation related with the ERK pathway dependent p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction. The p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction was identified as an essential marker for the ERK pathway dependent anti-proliferation in HT-29 and DLD-1 cells, and that was abolished in HCT-116 cells. We further confirmed importance of the role of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ in anti-proliferation by using p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$-/- HCT-116 cells. This study provides an evidence for an essentiality of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction in the regulation of proliferation of colorectal cancer cells by extracellular stimuli inducing prolonged ERK activation.

Materials and Methods

Cell culture

HT-29 (ATCC HTB-38) and DLD-1 (ATCC CCL-221) human colorectal cancer cells (Shirasawa *et al.,* 1993; Rowan *et al.,* 2000) were obtained from the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC, Rockville, MD). The HCT-16 p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ +/+ human colon carcinoma cell line and the derivative line HCT-16 p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$-/-, in which both p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ alleles are deleted by homologous recombination (Waldman *et al.,* 1995), were provided by Dr. Bert Vogelstein of John Hopkins Oncology Center. HT-29 and HCT-116 cells were maintained in McCoy's 5A medium supplemented with 10% (vol/vol) FBS, 100 U/ml of penicillin, and 100 μg/ml of streptomycin in 5% CO_2 at 37°C. DLD-1 colorectal cancer cells were maintained in RPMI1640 supplemented with 10% (v/v) fetal bovine serum (FBS), 100 U/ml of penicillin, and 100 μg/ml of strep- tomycin in 5% CO_2 at 37°C. Analyses were performed on cells at 70% confluence. To observe the effects of zinc, cells were serum-starved by growth for 16 to 20 h in a minimally serum starved medium (MSSM) containing 1% FBS, then either treated or not treated with 100 μM $ZnCl_2$. In required cases, PD98059 (Calbiochem, La Jolla, CA) was treated as 20 μM at 30 min prior to $ZnCl_2$ treatment. Lactacystin (Cal- biochem) was applied to 2 μM at 9 h before harvest cells when required.

Western blot analysis

For preparation of proteins, attached cells were rinsed twice with ice-cold PBS, harvested, Then lysed di- rectly in Laemmli SDS sample buffer (Laemmli, 1970). Samples were boiled and subjected to 8-10% sodium dodecyl sulfate-polyacrylamide gel electophoresis (SDS- PAGE) followed by Western blot analysis using anti-p-ERK (New England Biolabs, Beverly, MA), -ERK (Stratagene, La Jolla, CA), or p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Inc., Santa Cruz, CA) primary antibodies followed by matching horse radish peroxi- dase conjugated secondary antibodies. Protein bands were visualized using enhanced chemiluminescence (Genepia, Seoul, Korea) according to the manufac- turer's instructions.

Immunocytochemistry and BrdU incorporation

HT29, DLD-1 or p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ +/+ p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ -/- HCT-116 cells were plated onto cover slips at a density of 2× 10^5 cells/coverslip within 6-well plates. Cells were grown overnight, serum starved for 16-20 h. Cells were treated or non-treated with 100 μM $ZnCl_2$ for 9 h before immunocytochemical analysis. Cells were then washed twice with PBS, fixed in a methanol/ formaldehyde (99:1) mixture at -20°C for 15 min, permeabilized with PBS containing 0.2% Triton-X-100, then finally gently washed 5 times with PBS for 5 min. After treatment with a blocking solution (PBS con- taining 1% BSA, 0.1% gelatin, and 5% goat serum), the cells were further incubated with primary antibody (anti-p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ antibody at a 1:100 dilution) for 2 h, then washed 5 times with PBS containing 1% BSA and 0.1% gelatin. Cells were then further incubated with goat anti-rabbit-Rhodamine Red TM-X-conjugated secondary antibody at a 1:100 dilution for 1 h, then washed 5 times with PBS. For a BrdU incorporation study, cells were grown in a medium containing 20 μM BrdU for 12 h before immunocytochemical an- alysis. The cells were then fixed in 3.7% formalde- hyde for 10 min at room temperature and rinsed with PBS before being incubated for 10 min in 2 N HCl. Cells were then washed three times with PBS for 5 min. After blocking, the cells were incubated with anti-BrdU monoclonal antibody at a 1:20 dilution for 2 h and washed with PBS containing 1% BSA and 0.1% gelatin, followed by incubation with goat anti- mouse-CyTM2-conjugated secondary antibody at a 1:100 dilution for 1 h. The cells were then washed 5 times with PBS. Each analysis was performed at least three times. DAPI was then applied at a final concentration of 1 μg/ml in PBS for 10 min, then the cells were extensively washed with PBS and mounted for photography on a Radiance 2,000/MP multi-photon imaging system (Bio-Rad, UK).

Results and Discussion

p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ activation was identified as an important marker for anti-proliferation and that related with strong and prolonged ERK activation (Sewing *et al.,* 1997; Woods *et al.,* 1997; Kim *et al.,* 2002; Park *et al.,* 2002; 2003). However, it is not clear whether p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ activation is a required factor or just one of the indicators for anti-proliferation caused by extra- cellular stimuli that induce prolonged ERK activation.

In this study, we investigate the role of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction in the regulation of proliferation further
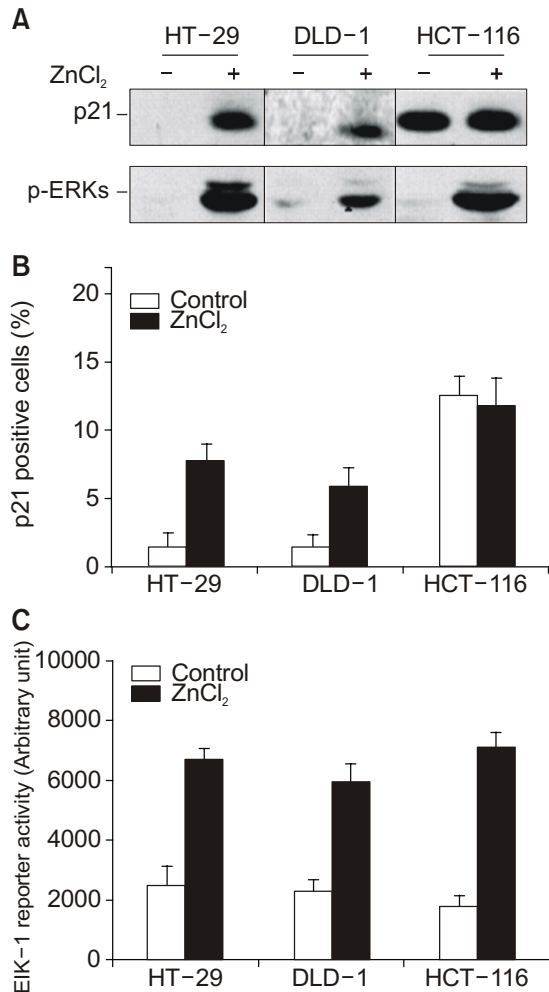
Figure 1. The effect of extracelluar zinc treatment on p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction and ERK pathway activation in different colorectal cancer cells. HCT-116, HT-29 and DLD-1 cells were starved for 18 h by growth in MSSM followed by treatment or not treatment with 100 μM ZnCl$_2$ for 9 h. (A) Cells were harvested and subjected to Western blot analysis using anti-p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ and -phospho-ERK antibodies as described in Materials and Methods. (B) p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ positive cells were counted by the results of immunocytochemistry using anti-p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ antibody followed by incubation with Rhodamine-Red-conjugated goat anti-rabbit IgG. Cell nuclei were stained with DAPI. p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ positive cells were estimated by dividing p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ positive cells with total DAPI stained cells. Error bars indicate the standard deviations of three independent experiments. (C) HCT-116, HT-29 and DLD-1 cells were grown as described in Figure 1A, and were co-transfected with 0.1 μg of luciferase reporter plasmid pFR-Luc and 25 ng of trans-activator pFA2-Elk-1. For normalization, the cells were co-transfected with 0.1 μg of plasmid containing the gene for β-galactosidase under the control of a CMV promoter. Cells were incubated in MSSM for additional 16 h. The medium was replaced with fresh medium with or without 100 μM ZnCl$_2$ and extracts were made 12 h after the zinc treatment. Luciferase activity was measured as described previously (Park *et al.,* 2002).

by investigating cell type specificity. We measured p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ level in several colorectal cancer cells at 9 h after treatment of 100 μM ZnCl$_2$ in minimally serum starved medium (MSSM) to detect p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction that occurs due to prolonged ERK activation (Park *et al.,* 2002; 2003). The p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction observed both in HT-29 and DLD-1 cells, but that was not observed in HCT-116 cells (Figure 1A). The differential regulation of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction was also similarly observed by quantitative immunocyto-chemical analysis (Figure 1B). These results indicated p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction by extracellular zinc varies de-pendent upon types of colorectal cancer cells. Differently from p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction, ERK and Elk-1 reporter activities responding to ERK activity were increased by 100 μM ZnCl$_2$ treatment in all three dif-ferent types of colorectal cancer cells grown in MSSM (Figure 1A and 1C). These results indicate that p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction characteristic by extracellular zinc may be abolished in HCT-116 cells although ERK activation is induced. The p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction in HT-29 cells was abolished by ERK inhibition by chemicals and genetic methods (Park *et al.,* 2002 and Oh *et al.,* 2002), indicating that the p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction in HT-29 cells may be caused by prolonged ERK activation (Park *et al.,* 2002; 2003). Therefore, we measured effect of the MEK inhibitor PD98059 to know whether p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ level can be regulated by PD98059 within HCT-116 cells.

The p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction by 100 μM ZnCl$_2$ in HT-29 cells was abolished by pre-treatment of PD98059 in HT-29 cells (Oh *et al.,* 2002) and DLD-1 cells (Figure 2A). On the other hand, p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction was not abolished in HCT-116 cells although ERK activities were significantly reduced by PD98059 pre-treatment (Figure 2B). These results indicated that the ERK pathway-dependent p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction was abo-lished in HCT-116 cells. p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ protein level in HCT-116 cells is abnormally high even without the zinc-dependent ERK activation (Figure 1A) by an unknown reason. It is known that p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ is pri-marily regulated by transcription, and p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ trans-cription is regulated by many different factors in-cluding p53, C/EBPα and β, EIA, and c-Myc (El-Deiry *et al.,* 1993; Timchenko *et al.,* 1996; Datto *et al.,* 1997; Claassen and Hann, 2000). p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ expres-sion is also tightly regulated at the level of protein degradation (Rousseau *et al.,* 1999; Sheaff *et al.,* 2000; Touitou *et al.,* 2001). We observed increase of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ protein level by treatment of the protea-some inhibitor, lactacystin (Xiao *et al.,* 2004), and the level of increase is similar to the level acquired by 100 μM ZnCl$_2$ in MSSM (Figure 3). In addition, level of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ was synergistically increased by co-treatment of lactacystin and zinc (Figure 3). These results indicate that the p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ protein may be
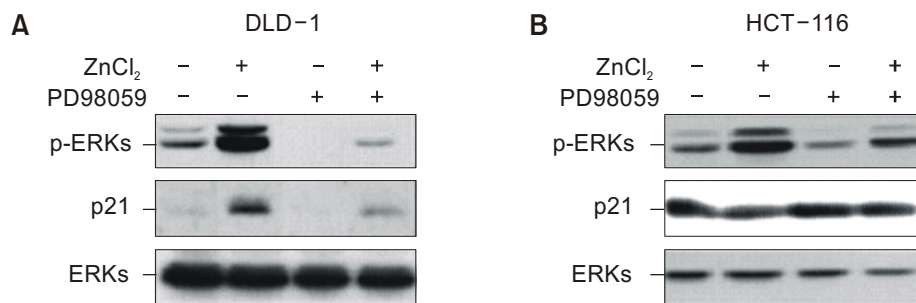
Figure 2. Effects of PD98059 on zinc-dependent induction of $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ in different colorectal cancer cells. DLD1 and HCT-116 cells were grown and treated with 100 μM $ZnCl_2$ as described in Figure 1A. When required, 10 μM of PD98059 was also treated for 30 min before zinc treatment. The cells were harvested at 9 h after zinc treatment for assay. ERK activities and ERK and $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ protein levels were measured by Western blot analysis using anti-phospho-ERK, -ERK and -p21 antibodies, respectively.
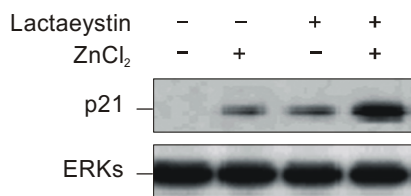

Figure 3. Effects of lactacystin, proteasome-dependent degradation inhibitor, on $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ protein stability within HT-29 cells. HT-29 cells were grown in MSSM for 16 h. The cells were harvested 9 h after treatment with 100 μM $ZnCl_2$ with or without co-treatment of 2 μM of lactacystein. The $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ and ERK protein levels were detected by Western blot analysis as described in Materials and Methods.

regulated at least partly by protein stability level involving proteasome. Maintenance of low $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ protein levels in HT-29 and DLD-1 cells indicate that the $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ level is probably tightly regulated in those cells, and the regulatory mechanism may be released in HCT-116 cells.

Cellular proliferation was significantly reduced in cells induced $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ by zinc treatment, and $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction was abolished by MEK inhibitors (Oh *et al.,* 2002; Park *et al.,* 2002; 2003). However, essentiality of $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ in anti-proliferation by pro-longed ERK activation caused by extracellular stimuli is not fully understood. In addition, most of the above studies related with anti-proliferation were performed by overexpression of $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ or by induction of $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ by extracellular zinc stimulus.

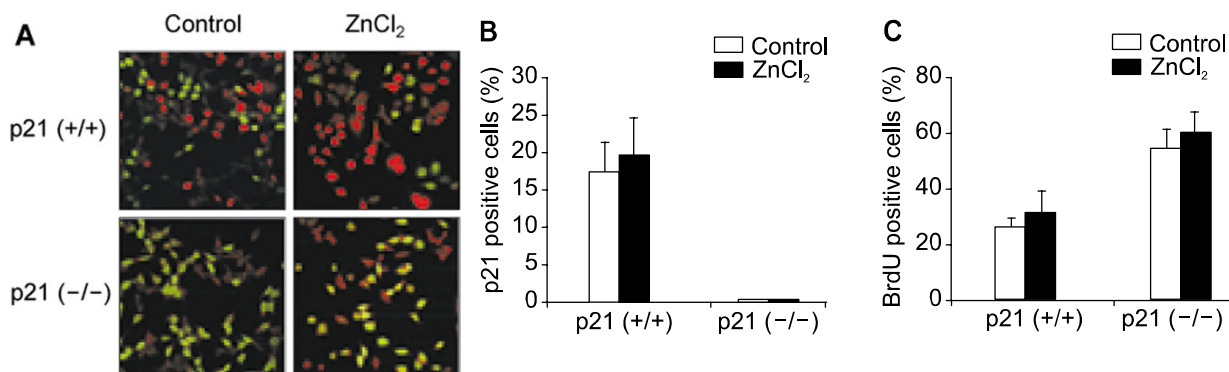We used $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ -/- HCT-116 cells in mea-

Figure 4. Effects of extracellular zinc treatment on the induction of $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ and BrdU incorporation in $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$+/+ and $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$-/- HCT-116 cells. $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$+/+ and $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$-/- HCT-116 cells were cultured for 48 h by growth in MSSM. The cells were labeled with 20 μM BrdU for the last 5 h before imunocytochemical assay (A) BrdU-incorporated and $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ positive cells were visualized after the immunostaining of $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ +/+ and $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ -/- HCT-116 cells culture in MSSM for 48 h against BrdU and $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$. (B) $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ positive cells were estimated by counting the number of $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ positive cells out of the total number of DAPI stained cells. Analyses were repeated at least three times. (C) BrdU-incorporated cells were counted after the immunostaining of $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ +/+ and $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$ -/- HCT-116 cells culture in MSSM for 48 h against BrdU and $p21^{Cip/WAF1}$. Analyses were repeated at least three times.

surement of an effect of zinc to clarify the role of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ in the proliferation of colorectal cancer cells. Because p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction ability was lost in the HCT-116 cells, it is an ideal cell type to compare with HT-29 and DLD-1 cells and to confirm whether p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction is an essential factor in the regulation of the proliferation by extracellula stimuli inducting prolonged ERK activation. None of the p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ -/- HCT-116 cells accumulated p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ in nuclear although 17% of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ +/+ HCT-116 cells actively expressed p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ by 100 μM ZnCl$_2$ treatment (Figure 4A and 4B). Percentage of cells induced p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ was not significantly increased by extracellular zinc treatment for both p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ +/+ and p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ -/- HCT-116 cells (Figure 4B).

In a resting state, 28% of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ +/+ HCT-116 cells actively incorporated BrdU in its nuclei, and percentage of cells incorporated BrdU was increased to 55% in case of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ -/- HCT-116. These results confirm importance of the p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction in the regulation of the proliferation of colorectal cancer cells. Interestingly, BrdU incorporation level was not reduced by 100 μM ZnCl$_2$ treatment for both p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ +/+ and p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ +/+ HCT-116 cells grown in MSSM. Therefore, HCT116 cells, which abolished the ERK pathway dependent p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction, have lost the regulatory function of proliferation. On the other hand, HT-29 cells which retain the ERK pathway dependent p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction function retained the regulatory function of proliferation (Park *et al.,* 2002).

Overall, p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ induction is an essential factor for the ERK pathway dependent anti-proliferation of colorectal cancer cells. The cell type specificity in the ERK pathway dependent growth inhibition of colorectal cancer cells may be attributed by induction of p21$^{Cip/WAF1}$ by prolonged activation of the ERK pathway.

Acknowledgement

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