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Human-Chimpanzee Differences in a FZD8 Enhancer Alter Cell-Cycle Dynamics in the Developing Neocortex

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Summary

The human neocortex differs from that of other great apes in several notable regards, including altered cell cycle, prolonged corticogenesis, and increased size [1, 2, 3, 4 and 5]. Although these evolutionary changes most likely contributed to the origin of distinctively human cognitive faculties, their genetic basis remains almost entirely unknown. Highly conserved non-coding regions showing rapid sequence changes along the human lineage are candidate loci for the development and evolution of uniquely human traits. Several studies have identified human-accelerated enhancers [6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14], but none have linked an expression difference to a specific organismal trait. Here we report the discovery of a humanaccelerated regulatory enhancer (HARE5) of FZD8, a receptor of the Wnt pathway implicated in brain development and size [15 and 16]. Using transgenic mice, we demonstrate dramatic differences in human and chimpanzee HARE5 activity, with human HARE5 driving early and robust expression at the onset of corticogenesis. Similar to *HARE5* activity, *FZD8* is expressed in neural progenitors of the developing neocortex [17, 18 and 19]. Chromosome conformation capture assays reveal that HARE5 physically and specifically contacts the core Fzd8 promoter in the mouse embryonic neocortex. To assess the phenotypic consequences of HARE5 activity, we generated transgenic mice in which Fzd8 expression is under control of orthologous enhancers (Pt-HARE5::Fzd8 and Hs-HARE5::Fzd8). In comparison to Pt-HARE5::Fzd8, Hs-HARE5::Fzd8 mice showed marked acceleration of neural progenitor cell cycle and increased brain size. Changes in HARE5 function unique to humans thus alter the cell-cycle dynamics of a critical population of stem cells during corticogenesis and may underlie some distinctive anatomical features of the human brain.

說到人類與其它生物的區別,一般人很難不聯想到我們獨特的大腦。 跟人類的近親黑猩猩比較,我們腦部發育有許多獨特的地方,例如 細胞週期加快,皮層新生(corticogenesis)時期延長,以及特大的新 皮層(neocortex)。雖然早在1975年King與Wilson就提出這些獨特的 變化主要是由於基因表達量的改變,而非基因本身編碼區改變所造 成,時至今日吾人對於人類腦部特化的遺傳基礎仍然所知有限。

近期的研究發現,許多高度保守的非編碼調節區,例如啟動子 (promoter)與強化子(enhancer),在人類譜系中有快速演化的現象。 此外,這些快速改變的調節區,經常位於與腦部發育有關基因的附 近。總總現象似乎支持,改變基因組中控制基因表達的非編碼區域, 對於人類特化的大腦有重要的貢獻。於是尋找在靈長類之間高度保 守,卻在人類演化歷程中快速改變的非編碼調節區域,並研究其功 能,也許可以解開人類大腦特化之謎。

本文作者發現長度約1,200 bp的強化子HARE5 (human-accelerated regulated enhancer),在人類與黑猩猩分道揚鑣之後,在前者累積了10個變異,但是在黑猩猩中僅有6個變異,這個現象符合上述候選基因的標準。除此之外,HARE5還有兩個值得注意的地方; (1)HARE5可以在新皮層發育時期活化下游的基因;(2)HARE5位於Frizzled 8 (FZD8)基因的上游,FZD8是Wnt訊號傳遞路徑中的一個成員,而Wnt訊號傳遞路徑在新皮層發育時期扮演非常重要的角色。因此合理的推測,HARE5在人類的快速演化的結果可以增加FZD8的表現,進而改變人類新皮層的發育。

為了研究HARE5在人類腦部特化的角色,研究人員首先分別將人類 與黑猩猩的HARE5轉殖至小鼠,並發現在皮質新生的過程中,人類 的HARE5活性高於黑猩猩的HARE5。進一步的實驗也證實HARE5 區域確實會與FZD8的啟動子接觸。 研究人員於是分別建構受人類、黑猩猩、以及小鼠HARE5控制的 小鼠FZD8基因片段,並且產生基因轉殖小鼠。結果發現,帶有人 類HARE5的基因轉殖鼠在皮質新生時,神經元先驅細胞的細胞週 期有加快的現象。此外,神經細胞的數目也增加了,這或許與細 胞週期的加速有關。最後,這些小鼠的皮質區比起帶有黑猩猩 HARE5的基因轉殖鼠增大約12%。

這個研究支持16年前Pasko Rakic 所提出的模型:神經元先驅細胞的差異是造成人類特異於其它靈長類腦部的關鍵。HARE5加速細胞週期而造成神經元先驅細胞以及神經細胞增加。增多的神經細胞會影響細胞排列以及結構,最後導致新皮層的增大。

當然,人類大腦的特化一定牽涉許多層面的改變,因此HARE5的 故事不可能解釋所有的現象。不過這個研究確實提供我們解開人 類特化之謎的一個例子。



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