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A series of 38 novel germline and somatic mutations of *NIPBL* in Cornelia de Lange syndrome

Mathilde Nizon¹, Marcia Henry¹, Caroline Michot¹, Clarisse Baumann², Anne Bazin³, Bettina Bessières¹, Sophie Blesson⁴, Marie-Pierre Cordier-Alex⁵, Albert David⁶, Andrée Delahaye-Duriez⁷, Anne-Lise Delezoïde², Anne Dieux-Coeslier⁸, Martine Doco-Fenzy⁹, Laurence Faivre¹⁰, Alice Goldenberg¹¹, Valérie Layet¹², Philippe Loget¹³, Sandrine Marlin¹, Jelena Martinovic¹, Sylvie Odent¹⁴, Laurent Pasquier¹⁴, Ghislaine Plessis¹⁵, Fabienne Prieur¹⁶, Audrey Putoux⁵, Marlène Rio¹, Hervé Testard¹⁷, Jean-Paul Bonnefont¹ and Valérie Cormier-Daire¹

1. Département de Génétique, Université Paris Descartes-Sorbonne Paris Cité, INSERM UMR1163, Institut IMAGINE, Hôpital Necker-Enfants Malades, Paris, France.
2. Département de Génétique, CHU Robert Debré, 75019 Paris
3. Département de Génétique, CH René Dubos, Pontoise, France
4. Service de Génétique, CHRU Tours, Hôpital Bretonneau, Tours, France
5. Service de Génétique Clinique, Hospices Civils de Lyon, Bron, France
6. Service de Génétique Médicale, CHU, Nantes, France
7. Service de Génétique, CHU Paris Seine-Saint-Denis, Hôpital Jean Verdier, Bondy, France
8. Service de Génétique Clinique, CHRU de Lille, Hôpital Jeanne de Flandre, Lille, France
9. Service de Génétique, CHU de Reims, Hôpital Maison Blanche, EA 3801 SFR CAP-Santé, Reims, France
10. Centre de Génétique, CHU de Dijon, Dijon, France
11. Département de Génétique, CHU, Rouen, France
12. Service de Génétique Médicale, GH du Havre, Hôpital Jacques Monod, Le Havre, France
13. Service d'anatomie et cytologie pathologiques, Hôpital Pontchaillou, Université de Rennes 1, CHU, Rennes, France
14. Service de Génétique Clinique, CHU Rennes, Hôpital Sud, Rennes, France
15. Service de Génétique Médicale, CHU Clémenceau, Caen, France
16. Service de Génétique Clinique, CHU de Saint-Etienne, Hôpital Nord, Saint-Priest-en-Jarez, France
17. Département de Pédiatrie, CHU Grenoble, Grenoble, France

Corresponding author

Valérie Cormier-Daire, MD-PhD

Département de Génétique Université Paris Descartes, Sorbonne Paris Cité, INSERM UMR1163

Institut IMAGINE

Hôpital Necker-Enfants Malades

Paris, France.

33 1 44 49 51 63

valerie.cormier-daيرة@inserm.fr

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Conglict of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

ABSTRACT

Cornelia de Lange syndrome is a multisystemic developmental disorder mainly related to de novo heterozygous *NIPBL* mutation. Recently, *NIPBL* somatic mosaicism has been highlighted through buccal cell DNA study in some patients with a negative molecular analysis on leukocyte DNA.

Here, we present a series of 38 patients with a Cornelia de Lange syndrome related to an heterozygous *NIPBL* mutation identified by Sanger sequencing. The diagnosis was based on the following criteria: 1) intrauterine growth retardation and postnatal short stature, 2) feeding difficulties and/or gastro-oesophageal reflux, 3) microcephaly, 4) intellectual disability and 5) characteristic facial features.

We identified 37 novel *NIPBL* mutations including 34 in leukocytes and three in buccal cells only. All mutations shown to have arisen *de novo* when parent blood samples were available. The present series confirms the difficulty in predicting the phenotype according to the *NIPBL* mutation. Until now, somatic mosaicism has been observed for twenty cases which does not seem to be consistently associated with a milder phenotype. Besides, several reports support a postzygotic event for those cases.

Considering these elements, we recommend a first-line buccal cell DNA analysis in order to improve gene testing sensitivity in Cornelia de Lange syndrome and genetic counseling.

Key words : Cornelia de Lange syndrome, *NIPBL*, somatic mosaicism, buccal cells

INTRODUCTION

Cornelia de Lange syndrome [MIM #122470, 300590, 610759, 300882, 614701] is a rare and severe multisystemic developmental disorder. Main clinical features include intrauterine growth retardation and postnatal short stature, microcephaly, limb defects ranging from brachydactyly to agenesis, characteristic facial features – arched eyebrows, synophrys, long philtrum and thin upper lip –, hirsutism, feeding difficulties, heart or urogenital malformation, hearing loss and variable degree of intellectual disability ¹.

Five genes have been identified so far in this syndrome. A heterozygous *NIPBL* [MIM #608667] mutation is observed in about 60% of the patients ²⁻⁴. The four other genes, *SMCIA* [MIM #300040], *SMC3* [MIM #606062], *HDAC8* [MIM #300269] and *RAD21* [MIM #606462], represent about 10% of identified mutations ⁵⁻⁷. While a small fraction of cases are inherited, majority of them results from *de novo* events. All these genes encode proteins involved in the cohesin complex, which is decisive for cell division and gene expression regulation. Recently, *NIPBL* somatic mosaicism has been highlighted through buccal cell DNA study in some patients with a negative molecular analysis on leukocyte DNA ⁸.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Here, we present a series of thirty-eight patients with a Cornelia de Lange syndrome caused by an heterozygous *NIPBL* mutation. Patients were recruited through national collaboration. The diagnosis of Cornelia de Lange syndrome was approved before molecular investigations based on the following criteria: 1) intrauterine growth retardation and postnatal short stature 2) feeding difficulties and/or gastro-oesophageal reflux 3) microcephaly, 4) intellectual disability and 5) characteristic facial features (see table 1). The study was approved by our hospital ethics board. Written informed patients and parent consents were obtained prior to genetic investigation.

NIPBL was analysed in first-line in all patients referred to our molecular genetics laboratory. DNA was isolated from leukocytes using the Puregene Blood Core Kit B (Qiagen), the Autopure automate (Qiagen) or the extraction blood kit Nucleon Bacc3 (GE Healthcare). DNA was additionally extracted from buccal cells in five patients with the Oragene saliva DNA collection Kit and according to the PrepIT protocol (DNA Genotek). cDNA was isolated from PAXgene blood RNA tubes (Qiagen) by a standard procedure for three patients with an intronic mutation. *NIPBL* coding region (GeneBank NG_006987.1) was sequenced with intronic primers designed by Primer3 Input (<http://bioinfo.ut.ee/primer3-0.4.0/>) and using the Big Dye Terminator cycle sequencing kit v3 (Applied Biosystems). Sequences were analysed on a 3130 or 3500 Genetic Analyser

sequencing machine (Applied Biosystems).

RESULTS

Among these thirty-eight patients, we identified thirty-four novel *NIPBL* mutations in leukocytes and three novel *NIPBL* mutations in buccal cells only. To note that nine saliva samples have been tested among *NIPBL* negative patients on leukocytes. Mutations included six nonsense mutations, eighteen frame shifts, six intronic mutations and seven missense mutations (see table 1). The c.5329-15A>G intronic mutation was identified in two unrelated probands. Patients 2, 17 and 26 had a distinct novel mutation only present in buccal cells and undetectable in leukocytes by Sanger sequencing. All mutations were shown to have arisen *de novo* when parent blood samples were available for DNA study. The missense mutations were predicted as damaging using Polyphen and Alamut software. The intronic mutations were predicted to alter a donor or acceptor splicing site according to the Human Splicing Finder predicting splicing software. To analyse the effect of intronic mutations, namely the c.64+2T>A, c.772-7_772-4delinsA and c.5329-15A>G mutations, we performed *NIPBL* cDNA analysis on patients 25, 27 and 29 RNA extracted from leukocytes. These mutations were found to respectively cause skipping of exon 2 containing the ATG translation initiation codon, partial retention of intron 7 leading to a frame shift with premature stop codon, and in frame deletion with exon 28 skipping responsible for the exclusion of thirty-three amino acids in the conserved HEAT domain H1 of the protein (data not shown). Finally, DNA extracted from buccal cells were tested in three patients with a known *NIPBL* mutation on leukocytes. The mutation was confirmed in the three buccal cell samples (data not shown).

DISCUSSION

Until now, over 300 distinct mutations have been reported in *NIPBL* (literature and our present series) including a proven somatic mosaicism for seventeen ones. Among them, 60% (196/325) are nonsense mutations, frame shifts or rearrangements, 16% (52/325) are splicing mutations and 24% (77/325) are missense mutations. All type of mutations have also been observed in patients with a somatic mosaicism. Mutations are spread all over the gene except for exons 13 and 16 as previously discussed, and most of them seem to be unique⁴.

To date, various attempts have failed to bring out a reliable phenotype-genotype correlation in patients with an *NIPBL* mutation^{9,10}. Indeed, whereas a *NIPBL* mutation usually leads to a more severe phenotype than a mutation in one of the other genes involved in Cornelia de Lange syndrome, unrelated probands with a similar *NIPBL* mutation can have a severe, a classic or a mild phenotype^{11,12}. The present series confirms the difficulty

in predicting the phenotype according to the *NIPBL* mutation. To the same extent, a somatic mosaicism does not seem to be consistently associated with a milder phenotype. In this report, the three patients with somatic *NIPBL* mutation presented with the usual features namely short stature, microcephaly, feeding difficulty, brachymetacarpus and mild to moderate intellectual disability. Facial dysmorphism was also suggestive of the disease. However, additional reports of somatic *NIPBL* mosaicism is required to exclude a possible genotype-phenotype correlation. Other events are probably involved in the pathophysiology of the disease supporting the wide range of severity.

Recently, buccal cell analysis has shown its relevance for the molecular study of patients presenting with a Cornelia de Lange syndrome. Thereby, mutation in buccal cells has been identified in probands negative for *NIPBL* mutation in leukocytes^{8,13}. Other reports support a postzygotic event. Indeed, somatic mosaicism has already been identified on leukocytes for four different *NIPBL* mutations, namely a large intragenic deletion, a frame shift, a nonsense and a missense mutation, by array-comparative genomic hybridisation, pyrosequencing and exome sequencing, respectively¹⁴⁻¹⁷. Almost 50% of patients negative for *NIPBL* mutation in leukocytes are predicted to have a somatic mosaicism⁸. Embryological data are in agreement with these results. Indeed, oral epithelium derives from embryonic ectoderm, which is also the precursor for the neural tube leading to brain development. Besides, buccal cells can be performed less invasively than fibroblasts. Considering these elements, we recommend a first-line buccal cell DNA analysis in order to easily improve gene testing sensitivity in Cornelia de Lange syndrome. The exome sequencing extent will probably lead to a better detection of low levels of mosaicism in different cell types, setting out more arguments to refine genetic counseling, cutting down the germline mosaicism likelihood¹⁸.

To conclude, *NIPBL* remains the major gene responsible for Cornelia de Lange syndrome either by germline or somatic mutation. The high frequency of somatic mosaicism supports the need for buccal cell DNA analysis. Further investigations should help understanding whether this is a disease or gene specific mechanism, or a more generalised one.

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TABLE LEGEND

Table 1. Molecular and clinical features of thirty-eight patients presenting with Cornelia de Lange syndrome. (F: female, M: male, NA: not available, SD: standard deviation, TOP: termination of pregnancy). Nucleotide numbering reflects cDNA numbering with +1 corresponding to the A of the ATG translation initiation codon in the reference sequence, according to journal guidelines (www.hgvs.org/mutnomen). The initiation codon is codon 1. Concerning clinical features, stature is represented as standard deviation compared to standard healthy population. Feeding difficulties are noticed as moderate when there is an impact on growth but without medical assistance; otherwise enteral nutrition device is indicated. Gastro-enteral reflux disease is considered as severe when a surgery was performed. Intellectual disability is represented according to OMS classification namely mild for IQ 55 to 70, moderate for IQ 40 to 55 and severe for IQ below 40. Facial dysmorphism is considered as classical when the diagnosis is obvious including fine arched eyebrows, synophris, long eyelashes, thin upper lip and anteverted nares.

Table 1. Molecular and clinical features of 38 novel patients presenting with Cornelia de Lange syndrome.

| Patient | Gender | Nucleotide mutation | Protein mutation | Exon/intron | Parents | Sample | Age | Intrauterine growth failure | Feeding difficulties | Gastro-oesophageal reflux | Limb abnormalities | Malformations | Short stature | Microcephaly | Intellectual disability | Behaviour trouble | Deafness | Facial dysmorphism |
|---------|--------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------|-----------|-----------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|---|---|---------------|--------------|-------------------------|-------------------|----------|--------------------|
| 1 | F | c.5_12delins11 | p.Asn2Lysfs*18 | exon 2 | NA | leukocytes | 23 years | NA | NA | yes | pes cavus | aortic stenosis | -5 SD | NA | moderate | severe | NA | classical |
| 2 | F | c.19del | p.His7Metfs*19 | exon 2 | NA | buccal cells only | 6 years | <-3 DS | moderate | NA | brachymetacarpary I | NA | -2 SD | -2 SD | moderate | moderate | yes | NA |
| 3 | F | c.143_147del | p.Glu48Glyfs*8 | exon 3 | de novo | leukocytes | 2 months | NA | NA | NA | distal phalanges hypoplasia | diaphragmatic hernia | NA | <-3 SD | mild | absent | NA | NA |
| 4 | F | c.275del | p.Ile92Asnfs*30 | exon 4 | de novo | leukocytes | 6 years | <-3 DS | enteral nutrition | severe | brachymetacarpary I | atrial septal defect, aortic coarctation, bifid uterus, Pierre Robin sequence | <-3 SD | -4 SD | moderate | absent | NA | classical |
| 5 | M | c.403del | p.Ser135Valfs*81 | exon 5 | NA | tissue | TOP at 20 GW | <-2 DS | - | - | limb defects | tetralogy of Fallot, Pierre Robin sequence | - | absent | - | - | - | classical |
| 6 | F | c.1342insC | p.Pro448Profs*19 | exon 9 | de novo | tissue | TOP at 32 GW | <-3 SD | - | - | limb defects | diaphragmatic hernia | - | absent | - | - | - | classical |
| 7 | M | c.1821_1824del | p.Glu607Aspfs*6 | exon 10 | de novo | lung tissue | TOP at 24 GW | <-3 SD | - | - | brachymetacarpary I | diaphragmatic hernia, hypospadias | - | absent | - | - | - | classical |
| 8 | M | c.1984A>T | p.Lys662* | exon 10 | de novo | leukocytes | 3 years | -3 SD | enteral nutrition | yes | limb defects | Pierre Robin sequence, cryptorchidly | -2 SD | -6 SD | severe | absent | yes | classical |
| 9 | M | c.2178del | p.Lys726Asnfs*68 | exon 10 | de novo | tissue | TOP at 31 GW | <-2 DS | - | - | brachymetacarpary I, phalanges hypoplasia | ventricular septal defect | - | -2 SD | - | - | - | classical |
| 10 | M | c.2259del | p.Arg754Aspfs*40 | exon 10 | de novo | tissue | TOP at 25 GW | <-2 DS | - | - | brachymetacarpary I, ectrodactyly | absent | - | -2 SD | - | - | - | classical |
| 11 | M | c.2412_2413delinsGA | p.Pro805Thrfs*10 | exon 10 | de novo | leukocytes | 6 months | <-3 SD | enteral nutrition | yes | ectrodactyly | hypospadias | -4 SD | -4 SD | moderate | absent | yes | moderate |
| 12 | M | c.2773_2774del | p.Lys925Glufs*2 | exon 10 | NA | leukocytes | 13 years | <-3 SD | moderate | NA | limb defects | hypospadias, cryptorchidly | -8 SD | -6 SD | severe | absent | NA | classical |
| 13 | F | c.3172_3184del | p.Glu058Profs*8 | exon 11 | Father NA | leukocytes | 9 months | <-2 SD | ? | NA | NA | NA | <-2 SD | <-2 SD | NA | NA | NA | classical |
| 14 | M | c.3316C>T | p.Arg1106* | exon 12 | de novo | leukocytes | 2.5 years | -2 SD | moderate | yes | brachymetacarpary I | NA | absent | absent | mild | absent | NA | NA |
| 15 | NI | c.3439C>T | p.Arg1147* | exon 12 | de novo | tissue | TOP at 14 GW | absent | - | - | limb defects | diaphragmatic hernia, ventricular septal defect, cleft palate | - | - | - | - | - | NA |
| 16 | M | c.3445C>T | p.Arg1149* | exon 12 | de novo | leukocytes | 13 years | <-3 SD | enteral nutrition | NA | limb defects | cardiac defect, hypospadias | -4 SD | <-3 SD | moderate | severe | yes | classical |
| 17 | M | c.4020_4024delinsAGTGT A | p.Lys1341Valfs*13 | exon 17 | NA | buccal cells only | 18 months | absent | absent | absent | brachydactyly | micropenis, cryptorchidly, pyelo ureteral duplication | NA | -2 SD | mild | mild | yes | classical |
| 18 | F | c.6516_6517insA | p.Val2173Serfs*3 | exon 38 | de novo | leukocytes | 8 years | -3 SD | moderate | yes | Clinodactyly V | absent | -2 SD | -4 SD | moderate | mild | absent | classical |
| 19 | M | c.6694C>T | p.Gln2232* | exon 39 | de novo | leukocytes | 2 years | <-3 SD | enteral nutrition | yes | limb defects | hypospadias, cryptorchidly, ventricular septal defect | <-8 SD | <-8 SD | severe | absent | absent | moderate |
| 20 | F | c.6987_6994delinsA | p.Asp2329Glufs*15 | exon 41 | NA | leukocytes | 1 year | <-2 SD | enteral nutrition | yes | moderate | NA | <-2 SD | NA | severe | severe | NA | classical |
| 21 | F | c.7969delinsTC | p.Gly2657Serfs*4 | exon 46 | de novo | leukocytes and buccal cells | 18 months | -3 SD | moderate | yes | brachymetacarpary I | NA | -2 SD | -2.5 SD | moderate | absent | yes | classical |
| 22 | M | c.8275_8276dup | p.Leu2759Leufs*6 | exon 47 | de novo | leukocytes | 6 years | absent | enteral nutrition | severe | absent | absent | -2 SD | -2 SD | moderate | mild | absent | moderate |
| 23 | F | c.8361insA | p.Val2788Metfs*32 | exon 47 | NA | leukocytes | 7 years | NA | moderate | NA | NA | NA | NA | <-2 SD | mild | absent | NA | NA |
| 24 | F | c.8377C>T | p.Arg2793* | exon 47 | NA | leukocytes | 4 years | <-3 SD | absent | absent | distal phalanges hypoplasia | absent | -3 SD | -4 SD | mild | absent | NA | moderate |
| 25 | F | c.64+2T>A | skipping ATG initiation codon | intron 2 | Father NA | leukocytes | 3 years | -2 SD | moderate | yes | syndactyly | absent | -3.5 SD | -4 DS | mild | absent | yes | moderate |
| 26 | M | c.358+1G>A | unknown | intron 4 | NA | buccal cells only | 14 years | <-2 SD | moderate | yes | brachymetacarpary I | cryptorchidly | NA | <-2 SD | moderate | absent | yes | NA |
| 27 | M | c.772-7_772-4delinsA | p.Asp258Tyrfs*13 | intron 7 | de novo | tissue | TOP at 23 GW | <-2 SD | - | - | brachydactyly | ventral septal defect, cystic kidneys | - | absent | - | - | - | classical |
| 28 | M | c.5225_5225+4del | unknown | intron 26 | NA | leukocytes and buccal cells | 3 months | <-2 SD | moderate | NA | brachydactyly, syndactyly | micropenis | <-2 SD | <-3 SD | moderate | NA | yes | classical |
| 29 | F | c.5329-15A>G | p.Ile1777_Arg1809del | intron 27 | NA | leukocytes | 10 years | NA | absent | absent | brachydactyly | NA | no | -3 SD | NA | NA | NA | moderate |
| 30 | M | c.5329-15A>G | p.Ile1777_Arg1809del | intron 27 | de novo | leukocytes | 7 years | <-3 SD | absent | NA | brachymetacarpary I | NA | -3 SD | -4 SD | mild | absent | NA | NA |
| 31 | F | c.6250-1G>A | unknown | intron 35 | de novo | leukocytes | 21 months | <-3 SD | enteral nutrition | NA | brachymetacarpary I, phalanges hypoplasia | Pierre Robin sequence | -4 SD | -6 SD | moderate | absent | yes | classical |
| 32 | M | c.80_89delins16 | p.Pro27_Pro29delinsLeuGlnLeuProAsn | exon 3 | de novo | leukocytes | 18 months | <-3 SD | enteral nutrition | absent | Brachydactyly, clinodactyly V | pulmonar stenosis, cryptorchidly | -5 SD | -4 SD | moderate | absent | absent | moderate |
| 33 | M | c.6148A>T | p.Ile2050Phe | exon 35 | Father NA | leukocytes | 19 years | <-3 SD | moderate | severe | brachymetacarpary I, syndactyly | micropenis, cryptorchidly | NA | <-3 SD | severe | absent | NA | NA |
| 34 | F | c.6221T>A | p.Met2074Lys | exon 35 | de novo | leukocytes | 14 years | -2 SD | absent | absent | brachymetacarpary I | NA | absent | -2.5 SD | mild | absent | NA | moderate |
| 35 | M | c.6275T>C | p.Leu2092Pro | exon 36 | de novo | tissue | TOP at 15 GW | absent | - | - | limb defects | absent | - | no | - | - | - | moderate |
| 36 | F | c.6430C>T | p.Leu2144Phe | exon 37 | NA | leukocytes | 1 month | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA |
| 37 | M | c.6817G>A | p.Gly2273Arg | exon 40 | de novo | leukocytes | 20 years | <-3 SD | NA | NA | brachymetacarpary I | ventricular septal defect | -4 SD | -2 SD | mild | moderate | NA | NA |
| 38 | M | c.7012G>C | p.Ala2338Pro | exon 41 | de novo | leukocytes | 24 years | NA | NA | yes | camptodactyly | NA | absent | -2 SD | moderate | absent | NA | moderate |