Morphological features of TMPRSS2–ERG gene fusion prostate cancer

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Abstract

The TMPRSS2–ETS fusion prostate cancers comprise 50–70% of the prostate-specific antigen (PSA)-screened hospital-based prostate cancers examined to date, making it perhaps the most common genetic rearrangement in human cancer. The most common variant involves androgen-regulated TMPRSS2 and ERG, both located on chromosome 21. Emerging data from our group and others suggest that TMPRSS2–ERG fusion prostate cancer is associated with higher tumour stage and prostate cancer-specific death. The goal of this study was to determine if this common somatic alteration is associated with a morphological phenotype. We assessed 253 prostate cancer cases for TMPRSS2–ERG fusion status using an ERG break-apart FISH assay. Blinded to gene fusion status, two reviewers assessed each tumour for presence or absence of eight morphological features. Statistical analysis was performed to look for significant associations between morphological features and TMPRSS2–ERG fusion status. Five morphological features were associated with TMPRSS2–ERG fusion prostate cancer: blue-tinged mucin, cribriform growth pattern, macronucleoli, intraductal tumour spread, and signet-ring cell features, all with p-values <0.05. Only 24% (n=30/125) of tumours without any of these features displayed the TMPRSS2–ERG fusion. By comparison, 55% (n=38/69) of cases with one feature (RR=3.88), 86% (n=38/44) of cases with two features (RR=20.06), and 93% (n=14/15) of cases with three or more features (RR=44.33) were fusion positive (p<0.001). To our knowledge, this is the first study that demonstrates a significant link between a molecular alteration in prostate cancer and distinct phenotypic features. The strength of these findings is similar to microsatellite unstable colon cancer and breast cancer involving BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutations. The biological effect of TMPRSS2–ERG overexpression may drive pathways that favour these common morphological features that pathologists observe daily. These features may also be helpful in diagnosing TMPRSS2–ERG fusion prostate cancer, which may have both prognostic and therapeutic implications.

Keywords: fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH); translocation; gene fusion; blue-tinged mucin; cribriform growth pattern; intraductal tumour spread; signet-ring cell features; collagenous micronodules; macronucleoli

Introduction

Through careful characterization of tumours with specific chromosomal or molecular genetic aberrations, it is now clear that, conversely, the morphological phenotype of a tumour may suggest an underlying genotype. For example, microsatellite unstable colorectal cancer as seen in hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer is characterized by poorly differentiated tumour cells, an expanding growth pattern with pushing borders, a pronounced lymphocytic reaction with tumour-infiltrating lymphocytes, and the lack of dirty necrosis [1–5]. Breast cancer associated with BRCA1 germline mutations frequently shows a higher mitotic rate, greater areas of the tumour with continuous pushing margins, and more lymphocytic infiltrate than sporadic...
cases. Breast cancer associated with BRCA2 mutations tends to have more tubule formation, greater areas of the tumour with continuous pushing margins, and lower mitotic count than sporadic cases [6,7]. More recently, it has also been recognized that basal-like breast carcinomas and translocation carcinomas of the kidney show a combination of morphological features that can predict the presence of underlying genetic aberrations [12–16].

Several pathological criteria are considered useful in the diagnosis of prostate cancer, including the presence of intraluminal blue-tinged mucin, intraluminal crystalloids, enlarged nuclei, prominent nucleoli, amphophilic cytoplasm, collagenous micronodules, glomerulations, and perineural invasion [17]. Of these, the last three have been considered highly specific and helpful in the diagnosis of limited prostate cancer in needle core biopsies [8–11]. At the molecular level, numerous genetic alterations have been characterized in prostate cancer, including PTEN loss, c-myc amplification, and germline susceptibility genes (eg 8q24 risk allele) [18,19]. Yet, none of these somatic or germline alterations have been associated with a specific constellation of morphological features (ie phenotype).

Recently, a common gene fusion in prostate cancer was identified that brings the androgen regulated gene TMPRSS2 (21q22.3) and an ETS transcription factor family member together, either through amplification, and germline susceptibility genes (eg 8q24 risk allele) [18,19]. Yet, none of these somatic or germline alterations have been associated with a specific constellation of morphological features (ie phenotype). The current study demonstrates for the first time that TMPRSS2–ERG fusion, 26 prostate cancer-positive needle core biopsies, 9 prostatectomies, and 1 transurethral resection of prostate sample were also evaluated. All tissue samples were collected with institutional review board approval. The clinical and pathological demographics for the 227 patients with clinically localized prostate cancer represented in the TMAs have been previously described [23]. In brief, the mean age at presentation was 63 years with a mean pre-operative prostate-specific antigen (PSA) of 18.5 ng/ml. There were 25% Gleason grade ≤6, 36% Gleason grade 7, and 39% Gleason grade ≥8. The break down of pathological stage (pT) was 48% pT2, and 52% pT3.

Pathological analysis

All cases were reviewed by two pathologists (J-MM and SP). Inclusion in this study required at least one assessable TMA histospt in step sections for the haematoxylin and eosin (H&E) and fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH) slides. Morphological features were evaluated blinded to the TMPRSS2–ERG fusion status. Assessment of common morphological features of prostate cancer included intraluminal features (blue-tinged mucin), nuclear features (macronucleoli), architectural features (intraductal tumour spread, cribriform growth pattern), malignant-specific features (extraprostatic extension, perineural invasion, glomerulations, and collagenous micronodules), histological variants (signet-ring cell features, foamy gland morphology), and comedonecrosis. The Gleason score for each TMA was assessed as previously described [29]. Histological subtypes in addition to acinar prostate cancer included ductal adenocarcinoma and small cell carcinoma [17,30]. Table 1 summarizes these features with their diagnostic and clinical significance.

In a subset of cases with equivocal diagnosis, and to distinguish intraductal tumour spread from cribriform prostate cancer, immunohistochemistry for prostatic basal cells was performed. For this purpose, serial paraffin sections were cut and set on coated slides. Subsequently, they were deparaffinized in xylene and rehydrated in graded ethanol. Pressure-cooking was applied as antigen retrieval method. Primary antibodies against p63 (1 : 50 dilution of clone 4A4, NeoMarkers, Fremont, CA, USA) and high molecular weight cytokeratin (1 : 200 dilution of clone 34βE12, DAKO, Carpinteria, CA, USA) for the detection of basal cells were applied with over night incubation at 4°C in a humid chamber. A similar protocol was used to detect MUC1 protein in 111 cases contained in the TMAs (1 : 600 dilution of clone Ma552, Novocastra Laboratories Ltd, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK). Immunostaining was performed with the avidin–biotin peroxidase technique [31].

Materials and methods

Study population

The analysis involved 227 cases of clinically localized prostate cancer from five hospital-based radical prostatectomy cohorts. The prostate cancer samples were embedded in five tissue microarrays (TMAs). One to 12, 0.6 mm in diameter TMA biopsy cores (median 3) were randomly taken from the dominant tumour nodule. To assess for homogeneity of TMPRSS2–ERG fusion, 26 prostate cancer-positive needle core biopsies, 9 prostatectomies, and 1 transurethral resection of prostate sample were also evaluated. All tissue samples were collected with institutional review board approval. The clinical and pathological demographics for the 227 patients with clinically localized prostate cancer represented in the TMAs have been previously described [23]. In brief, the mean age at presentation was 63 years with a mean pre-operative prostate-specific antigen (PSA) of 18.5 ng/ml. There were 25% Gleason grade ≤6, 36% Gleason grade 7, and 39% Gleason grade ≥8. The break down of pathological stage (pT) was 48% pT2, and 52% pT3.

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Table 1. Significance of morphological features, histological variants, and subtypes of prostate cancer cases assessed in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature/variant/subtype</th>
<th>Diagnostic and clinical significance</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Blue-tinged mucin       | Intraluminal content more commonly seen in prostate cancer than mimickers such as adenosis and atrophy | Epstein and Fynheer, 1992 [46]  
Goldstein et al, 1995 [47]  
Ro et al, 1998 [48] |
| Macronucleoli           | Helpful feature establishing diagnosis of prostate cancer: Nucleoli may also be seen in benign reactive glands | Helpap, 1998 [49] |
| Intraductal tumour spread | Represents an advanced stage of prostate cancer progression and is often associated with high-grade tumour: Intraductal tumour spread in needle biopsies is frequently associated with poor prognostic parameters at time of radical prostatectomy | McNeal and Yemoto, 1996 [41]  
Cohen et al, 2000 [42]  
Guo and Epstein, 2006 [43] |
| Cribriform growth pattern | Often has a prominent intraductal component, and biologically behaves more like Gleason pattern 4. Invariably found in association with other patterns of adenocarcinoma | McNeal et al, 1986 [40]  
Amin et al, 1994 [50]  
Epstein et al and the ISUP Grading Committee, 2005 [51] |
| Extraprostatic extension | Places a tumour in pT3 category on TNM classification. There is strong association between extraprostatic extension and volume, grade, pathological stage, and rate of recurrence after radical prostatectomy | Wheeler et al, 1998 [52]  
Epstein et al, 1993 [53] |
| Perineural invasion     | Diagnostic criterion of prostate cancer: Present in 20% of needle biopsies | Bastacky et al, 1993 [54]  
Ali and Epstein, 2005 [55] |
| Glomerulations          | Diagnostic criterion of prostate cancer: Grading of these structures is controversial | Baiden et al, 1999 [8]  
Epstein et al of the ISUP Grading Committee, 2005 [51] |
| Collagenous micronodules | Diagnostic criterion of prostate cancer: Tumour should be graded based on the underlying glandular architecture | Baiden et al, 1999 [8]  
Bostwick et al, 1995 [44]  
Epstein et al and the ISUP Grading Committee, 2005 [51] |
| Comedonecrosis          | Gleason pattern 5 criterion. Can be present with solid nests or with cribriform masses of tumour | Epstein et al and the ISUP Grading Committee, 2005 [51] |
| Prostate cancer with signet-ring cell features | Signet-ring cells are present in 2.5% of cases of acinar prostate cancer. Associated with other forms of poorly differentiated prostate cancer. Final diagnosis of signet-ring cell prostate cancer should be assigned only upon examination of prostatectomy. It requires 25–50% of the tumour to be composed of signet-ring cells | Geurin et al, 1993 [56]  
Bostwick and Eble, 1997 [57] |
| Foamy gland morphology  | Prostate cancer that resembles benign prostate glands and may be associated with higher tumour grade and aggressive behaviour | Nelson and Epstein, 1996 [58]  
Tran et al, 2001 [59] |
| Prostate cancer with ductal features | Peripherally located tumours are often admixed with other patterns of acinar prostate cancer. In pure form ductal prostate cancer accounts for only 0.2–0.8 of prostate cancer and has an aggressive behaviour. Should be graded as Gleason score 4 + 4 = 8 | Bostwick et al, 1985 [60]  
Epstein and Woodruff, 1986 [61]  
Epstein et al and the ISUP Grading Committee, 2005 [51] |
| Small cell carcinoma of prostate | In about 50% of cases small cell carcinoma is admixed with adenocarcinoma of the prostate. Small cell carcinoma should be specified in the diagnosis for therapeutic and prognostic implications. In pure form it should not be assigned a Gleason grade | Ro et al, 1987 [62]  
Tetu et al, 1987 [63]  
Epstein et al and the ISUP Grading Committee, 2005 [51] |

Assessment of TMPRSS2–ERG fusion status using an interphase FISH assay testing for ERG break apart

We previously described the dual-colour interphase break-apart FISH assay to assess indirectly the fusion of TMPRSS2–ERG. Two differentially labelled probes were designed to span the telomeric and centromeric neighbouring regions of the ERG locus. As previously described, this break-apart probe system allows differentiation between TMPRSS2–ERG fusion through translocation, TMPRSS2–ERG fusion through an intronic deletion, and no gene rearrangement [21–23, 28]. Briefly, a nucleus without ERG rearrangement demonstrates two pairs of juxtaposed red and green signals, forming yellow fusion signals. A nucleus with an ERG break apart (reflecting a TMPRSS2–ERG fusion through translocation) shows split apart of one juxtaposed red–green signal pair, resulting in a single red and green signal for the translocated ERG allele, and a still combined (yellow) signal for the non-translocated ERG allele in each nucleus. Finally, a nucleus with deletion of the telomeric (green) ERG break-apart probe (reflecting a
**TMPRSS2–ERG** fusion through deletion) shows one juxtaposed red–green signal pair (yellow) for the non-rearranged allele, and a single red signal for the rearranged (through deletion) allele. The potential technical difficulties with this assay included the absence of diagnostic material to evaluate, weak probe signals, and overlapping nuclei preventing accurate assessment.

The samples were analysed under a ×60 oil immersion objective using an Olympus BX-51 fluorescence microscope equipped with appropriate filters, a charge-coupled device camera (Olympus, Center Valley, PA, USA), and the CytoVision FISH imaging and capturing software (Applied Imaging, San Jose, CA, USA). Evaluation of the tests was independently performed by two pathologists (J-MM and SP) with expertise in analysing interphase FISH experiments. For each case, we attempted to score at least 100 nuclei. Cases with significant differences between the results of both pathologists were refereed by a third pathologist (MAR).

Semi-automated quantitative image analysis of **MUC1**

The intensity of MUC1 protein expression was evaluated using a semi-automated quantitative image analysis system, ACIS II (ChromaVision, San Juan Capistrano, CA, USA), as previously described [32].

**Statistical analysis**

All analyses were performed using SPSS 13.0 for Windows.

Contingency tables were run for each morphological parameter and **TMPRSS2–ERG** fusion status. We evaluated sensitivity and specificity and used Fisher’s exact test as statistical significance test for association. The same statistics were applied to evaluate associations between morphological features.

Logistic regression was used to evaluate the prediction of **TMPRSS2–ERG** fusion status based on morphological features. We applied forward selection with Wald statistics as the selection method. Based on the selected features, each independently significant in logistic regression, a new variable was created to characterize a model that evaluated the presence of multiple morphological features to predict **TMPRSS2–ERG** fusion compared with having none of the significant individual morphological features.

The association between MUC1 protein expression and **TMPRSS2–ERG** fusion status was assessed using the t-test.

For all analyses, two-tail p-values ≤0.05 were considered statistically significant.

**Results**

Of all the common morphological features described above, one or more was observed in 66% (167/253) of the cases, and 63% of these (105/167) were **TMPRSS2–ERG** fusion positive. The remaining 34% (86/253) of cases did not show any of the above mentioned morphological feature, and 83% of these (71/86) were fusion negative.

Eight histological features were evaluated for their association with **TMPRSS2–ERG** fusion status, including cribriform growth pattern, macronucleoli, blue-tinged mucin, intraductal tumour spread, foamy gland morphology, collagenous micronodules, signet-ring

**Table 2. Association of **TMPRSS2–ERG** fusion status and morphological features**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morphological features</th>
<th>Negative (n = 133) No (%)</th>
<th>Positive (n = 120) No (%)</th>
<th>Sensitivity</th>
<th>Specificity</th>
<th>p-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cribriform growth pattern</td>
<td>Negative 109 (82.0)</td>
<td>50 (41.7)</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive 24 (18.0)</td>
<td>70 (58.3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macronucleoli</td>
<td>Negative 122 (91.7)</td>
<td>81 (67.5)</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive 11 (8.3)</td>
<td>39 (32.5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue-tinged mucin</td>
<td>Negative 129 (97.0)</td>
<td>97 (80.8)</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive 4 (3.0)</td>
<td>23 (19.2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intraductal tumour spread</td>
<td>Negative 128 (96.2)</td>
<td>38 (31.7)</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive 5 (3.8)</td>
<td>82 (68.3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foamy gland morphology</td>
<td>Negative 113 (85.0)</td>
<td>89 (74.2)</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive 20 (15.0)</td>
<td>31 (25.8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collagenous micronodules</td>
<td>Negative 132 (99.2)</td>
<td>111 (92.5)</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive 1 (0.8)</td>
<td>9 (7.5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signet-ring cell features</td>
<td>Negative 131 (98.5)</td>
<td>111 (92.5)</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive 2 (1.5)</td>
<td>9 (7.5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glomerulations</td>
<td>Negative 131 (98.5)</td>
<td>115 (95.8)</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive 2 (1.5)</td>
<td>5 (4.2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>
cell features, and glomerulations. Table 2 summarizes the association between TMPRSS2–ERG fusion status and these morphological features. Other features and subtypes of prostate cancer that were not included in the selection are extraprostatic extension (n = 3), perineural invasion (n = 14), comedonecrosis (n = 6), small cell carcinoma (n = 2), and ductal adenocarcinoma (n = 5). The reason for exclusion was infrequent occurrence. For extraprostatic extension and perineural invasion, this is probably owing to the lack of representation in TMA cores.

After logistic regression analysis, the following five morphological features were shown to be associated with positive TMPRSS2–ERG fusion status: blue-tinged mucin, cribriform growth pattern, macronucleoli, intraductal tumour spread, and signet-ring cell features. Eighty-five per cent (23/27) of cases with blue-tinged mucin (Figures 1A and B), 68% (50/74) of cases with cribriform growth pattern (Figures 1C and D), 78% (39/50) of cases with macronucleoli, 88% (38/43) of cases with intraductal tumour spread (Figures 1E and F), and 82% (9/11) of cases with signet-ring cell features (Figures 2A and B) were TMPRSS2–ERG fusion positive. The presence of collagenous micronodules (Figures 2C and D) did not result as independently significant (p = 0.056). Glomerulations and foamy gland features were not significantly associated with gene fusion (Figures 2E and F).

Table 3 shows the final model. Each morphological feature within this model has a significant relative risk (p < 0.05). Table 4 illustrates the association between the number of morphological features in the best model and fusion status after logistic regression analysis. Categorical variables are considered from 0 to 3, the latter representing cases with three or more features. Level 0 (no features of best model) is used as the reference. Of 125 cases with no features included in the best model, only 24% (n = 30) were TMPRSS2–ERG fusion positive. By comparison, 55% (38/69) of cases with one feature, 86% (38/44) of cases with two features, and 93% (14/15) of cases with three or more features of the best model, were fusion positive (p < 0.001). The model has a sensitivity of 75% and a specificity of 71% in predicting positive TMPRSS2–ERG fusion status.

Cross-tabulation assessment between morphological features showed significant association between tumour intraductal spread and cribriform growth pattern (p < 0.001), tumour intraductal spread and collagenous micronodules (p = 0.015), and blue-tinged mucin and macronucleoli (p = 0.008). In addition, the combination of blue-tinged mucin and macronucleoli, and cribriform growth and intraductal tumour spread, were significantly associated with positive TMPRSS2–ERG fusion status (p < 0.001).

Two of three cases with extraprostatic extension, six of 14 cases with perineural invasion, and four of six cases with comedonecrosis were TMPRSS2–ERG fusion positive. Of non-acinar prostate cancer cases, the two small cell carcinomas were gene fusion negative, and two of five ductal adenocarcinomas were positive for the TMPRSS2–ERG fusion.

No significant statistical association was found between Gleason score and TMPRSS2–ERG fusion status.

A significant association between MUC1 protein expression and TMPRSS2–ERG fusion status was identified (p = 0.019). Figure 3 illustrates MUC1 positivity of TMPRSS2–ERG fusion positive prostate cancer, and the results of their association.

Discussion

The histological recognition of a tumour phenotype associated with specific genotype is an important bridge between pathology and molecular analysis. Depending on the clinical significance, these observations may become relevant for patient management. In the TMPRSS2–ETS fusion prostate cancer scenario, recent work has demonstrated that the TMPRSS2–ERG variant is associated with higher tumour stage and prostate cancer-specific death [22,26,28]. In one study that included men diagnosed with clinically localized prostate cancer in the pre-PSA era and followed with expectant management (ie watchful waiting), the presence of the TMPRSS2–ERG gene fusion in their diagnostic tissue was associated with either the development of prostate cancer metastases or prostate cancer-specific death, with up to 22 years of clinical follow up [28]. Similar to results of our previous studies [22,26,28], we did not identify an association between gene fusion and Gleason score.

However, we did observe significant associations with some histological patterns that have been linked to more aggressive prostate cancer, such as signet-ring cell morphology and intraductal tumour spread [22,26,28], and the clinical parameters mentioned above. The TMPRSS2–ERG gene fusion appears to be independent of Gleason score but associated with other features linked to aggressive prostate cancer. These data suggest that in addition to a diagnostic utility, the presence of the TMPRSS2–ERG gene fusion may also be important prognostically. Hence the need to have reproducible morphological screening criteria to determine which prostate cancer deserves a confirmatory test (ie FISH). This current study demonstrates that the phenotype of TMPRSS2–ERG fusion prostate cancer includes common morphological features that pathologists observe every day.

It is well documented that other carcinomas with specific germline or somatic alterations show a combination of recognizable histopathological features. Our results for sensitivity, specificity, and relative risk are comparable with those of microsatellite unstable colon cancer and the breast cancers seen in BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutation carriers (Table 5). Translocation carcinomas of the kidney and basal cell-like breast carcinomas have also been associated with a combination
Figure 1. H&E stains and corresponding FISH images of the TMPRSS2–ERG fusion assay. (A) Prostate cancer Gleason pattern 3 showing blue-tinged mucin. Note benign prostatic glands at 12 and 3 o’clock. (B) FISH image of the red-boxed area in A. One yellow and one red signal are present in each nucleus, demonstrating the presence of TMPRSS2–ERG fusion through deletion. The double-framed yellow inset is a magnification of the yellow boxed area, showing two representative nuclei of the prostate cancer gland. (C) Prostate cancer Gleason pattern 4 with cribriform appearance. (D) FISH image of the red boxed area in C. One yellow and one red signal are present in each nucleus, demonstrating the presence of TMPRSS2–ERG fusion through deletion. The double-framed yellow inset is a magnification of the yellow boxed area, showing two representative nuclei of the prostate cancer area. (E) Intraductal spread of prostate cancer, predominantly Gleason pattern 4. (F) FISH image of the red boxed area in E. Prostate cancer nuclei show one yellow and one red signal each, demonstrating the presence of TMPRSS2–ERG fusion through deletion. The double-framed yellow inset is a magnification of the yellow boxed area, showing two representative nuclei of prostate cancer. In contrast, the nuclei of basal cells show two yellow signals each, demonstrating the absence of genetic aberration. The double-framed green inset is a magnification of the green boxed area showing representative nuclei of basal cells. Original magnification of H&E images, ×20 objective. Original magnification of FISH images, ×60 objective.
Figure 2. H&E stains and corresponding FISH images of TMPRSS2–ERG fusion assay. (A) Prostate cancer with Gleason patterns 4 and 5 showing focal signet-ring cell morphology. (B) FISH image of the red boxed area in A. The tumour cells show one yellow and one red signal for each nucleus, demonstrating the presence of TMPRSS2–ERG fusion through deletion. The double-framed yellow inset is a magnification of the yellow boxed area showing two representative nuclei of prostate cancer. (C) Prostate cancer with collagenous micronodules, Gleason patterns 3 and 4. (D) FISH image of the red boxed area in C. Tumour cells show one yellow and one red signal for each nucleus, demonstrating the presence of TMPRSS2–ERG fusion through deletion. The double-framed inset illustrates the magnified view of the yellow boxed area showing two representative nuclei of prostate cancer. (E) Prostate cancer with foamy gland morphology. (F) FISH image of the red boxed area in E. Prostate cancer nuclei show one yellow and one red signal each, demonstrating the presence of TMPRSS2–ERG fusion through deletion. The double-framed yellow inset is a magnification of the yellow boxed area showing two representative nuclei of prostate cancer. Original magnification of H&E images, ×20 objective. Original magnification of FISH images, ×60 objective.

The findings in the current study might also expand our understanding of genotype/phenotype links in prostate cancer. One of the most striking findings in our study is the significant association of blue-tinged mucin with positive TMPRSS2–ERG fusion status. This is a quite common histological finding that, to our knowledge, has not been associated with any molecular event so far. In one study of consultation service material, intraluminal blue mucin...
Table 3. Best model for morphological features associated with positive TMPRSS2–ERG fusion status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morphological features</th>
<th>RR</th>
<th>95% CI lower</th>
<th>95% CI upper</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intraductal spread</td>
<td>8.312</td>
<td>2.835</td>
<td>24.371</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cribriform pattern</td>
<td>2.072</td>
<td>1.020</td>
<td>4.206</td>
<td>0.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue-tinged mucin</td>
<td>5.893</td>
<td>1.796</td>
<td>19.333</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macronucleoli</td>
<td>4.730</td>
<td>2.117</td>
<td>10.571</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signet-ring cell</td>
<td>7.274</td>
<td>1.394</td>
<td>37.951</td>
<td>0.019</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Univariate logistic regression of best model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of features</th>
<th>Fusion negative (n = 133)</th>
<th>Fusion positive (n = 120)</th>
<th>RR</th>
<th>95% CI lower</th>
<th>95% CI upper</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>REF</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.882</td>
<td>2.073</td>
<td>7.269</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20.056</td>
<td>7.727</td>
<td>52.058</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>44.333</td>
<td>5.595</td>
<td>351.286</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

secretions were present in a third of prostate cancer cases [35]. This is exactly the same prevalence of fusion positive tumours (33%) in the clinical samples that we included in the current study (data not shown), which falls in the range of the previously described cohorts. Regarding prostate cancer progression, the presence of acidic mucins and overexpression of mucin-related genes (e.g., MUC1) has been linked to aggressive prostate cancer [36–38]. Remarkably, we found a significant association between MUC1 protein expression and TMPRSS2–ERG prostate cancer, further supporting this molecular bond. Given the parallel prevalence of TMPRSS2–ERG fusion and blue-tinged mucin and their significant association, as well as the aforementioned link with MUC1 expression, it is reasonable to speculate that TMPRSS2–ERG fusion may alter molecular pathways, favouring mucin secretion and the expression of other patterns illustrated through this study. Another example is signet-ring cell morphology, also linked to the gene fusion and previously associated with mucin production and the presence of high-grade prostate cancer [39]. Cross-tabulation analysis linked the presence of blue-tinged mucin with macronucleoli, another common histological finding that was also associated with positive fusion status.

Another remarkable finding is the significant association of TMPRSS2–ERG fusion prostate cancer with cribriform growth pattern and intraductal tumour spread. The latter is quite common in infiltrating cribriform acinar prostate cancer and has a unique biological significance [40,41], given the strong association with several factors contributing to increased risk of progression after prostatectomy, including high Gleason grade, large tumour volume, positive surgical margins, and extensive perineural invasion [42]. Intraductal tumour spread probably represents a late stage in tumour progression [30,43], and the TMPRSS2–ERG fusion is thought to be an early event in the development of invasive prostate cancer [23]. We may hypothesize that TMPRSS2–ERG gene fusion not only drives phenotypic expression but also may imply distinct molecular alterations leading to more aggressive behaviour [22,26,28]. The biological role of TMPRSS2–ERG gene rearrangement may explain prostate cancer progression. TMPRSS2 is a tightly androgen regulated gene and the ETS genes of transcription factors are putative oncogenes [36–38]. In addition to the oncogenic potential of the TMPRSS2–ERG fusion product, loss of genes with

**Figure 3.** MUC1 immunostain and association with TMPRSS2–ERG fusion status. (A) Prostate cancer Gleason pattern 3 showing high MUC1 protein expression. The tumour is TMPRSS2–ERG fusion positive by FISH and features blue-tinged mucin and macronucleoli on H&E (not shown). (B) Significant association between MUC1 protein expression (95% confidence interval of immunostaining intensity score), and TMPRSS2–ERG fusion status (p = 0.019)
tumour suppressor gene potential located in the deletion site (eg HMGN1, Ets-2) may be associated with even worse outcome [36–38].

One potential limitation of this study is the under-representation of certain morphological features on TMAs. Examples include collagenous micronodules, a prostate cancer-specific but infrequent diagnostic finding [44], extraprostatic extension and perineural invasion, which may have been missed, given the targeted central areas of tumour masses. Further evaluation of the significant morphological features for inter-observer agreement as well as validation on larger cohorts is needed. The main focus of the current study was to find the aforementioned morphological features of prostate cancer associated with TMPRSS2–ERG gene fusion, and did not explore its prevalence in high-grade prostatic intraepithelial neoplasia (PIN) or in benign lesions such as atrophy. Consistent with recently published data [45], we have found that about 20% of high-grade PIN lesions harbour the TMPRSS2–ERG gene fusion [23]. A follow-up study that includes a large series of prostate cancer with paired high-grade PIN lesions is currently underway.

In summary, we have demonstrated a significant association between common morphological features of prostate cancer (phenotype) and TMPRSS2–ERG fusion prostate cancer (genotype). The presence of any of the significant features could potentially be used to alert the pathologist to the diagnosis of a fusion positive prostate cancer. This association may also help to identify higher risk prostate cancer, impacting clinical management. Finally, these findings may help us understand specific biological pathways associated with this recently described translocation.

### Acknowledgements

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### References


### Table 5. Selection of different carcinomas with gene-alteration-specific morphological features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of carcinoma</th>
<th>Morphological features</th>
<th>Sensitivity</th>
<th>Specificity</th>
<th>Odds ratio</th>
<th>p-Value</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microsatellite unstable colon cancer</td>
<td>&gt;2 TIL/HPF</td>
<td>0.21–0.90</td>
<td>0.77–0.97</td>
<td>9.8–16.3</td>
<td>&lt;0.005</td>
<td>Greenson et al, 2004 [2], Alexander et al, 2001 [1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Absence of dirty necrosis</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>Greenson et al, 2003 [2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crohn’s-like inflammatory reaction</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>Greenson et al, 2003 [2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Any mucinous differentiation</td>
<td>0.22–0.67</td>
<td>0.82–0.93</td>
<td>2.7–3.7</td>
<td>&lt;0.05</td>
<td>Greenson et al, 2003 [2], Alexander et al, 2001 [1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRCA1 associated breast cancer</td>
<td>Higher mitotic counts*</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1.5–3.0</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>Lakhani et al, 1998 [7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greater proportion of tumour with continuous pushing margins*</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1.8–2.9</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>Lakhani et al, 1998 [7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRCA2 associated breast cancer</td>
<td>Higher score for tubule formation*</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1.9–2.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.002</td>
<td>Lakhani et al, 1998 [7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More lymphocytic infiltration*</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>5.1–13.4</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>Lakhani et al, 1998 [7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greater proportion of tumour with continuous pushing margins*</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2.6–3.2</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>Lakhani et al, 1998 [7]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TMPPRSS2–ERG fusion prostate cancer</td>
<td>Lower mitotic count*</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0.1–0.9</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>Current study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cribriform growth pattern</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>Current study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intraductal tumour spread</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>8.31</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blue-tinged mucin</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Macronucleoli</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Signet-ring cell features</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>7.33</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* When compared with sporadic breast cancers.

1 Relative risk.

n/a = not available.


prostate carcinomas and paired HGPIN lesions. Neoplasia 2006;8:826–832.