Role of Rel-related Factors in Control of c-myc Gene Transcription in Receptor-mediated Apoptosis of the Murine B Cell WEHI 231 Line

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Summary

Treatment of immature murine B lymphocytes with an antiserum against their surface immunoglobulin (slg)M results in cell death via apoptosis. The WEHI 231 B cell line (IgM, kappa) has been used extensively as a model for this anti-Ig receptor-mediated apoptosis. Anti-slg treatment of WEHI 231 cells causes an early, transient increase in the levels of c-myc messenger RNA and gene transcription, followed by a rapid decline below control values. Given the evidence for a role of the c-myc gene in promoting apoptosis, we have characterized the nature and kinetics of changes in the binding of Rel-related factors, which modulate c-myc promoter activity. In exponentially growing WEHI 231 cells, multiple Rel-related binding activities were detectable. The major binding species was identified as p50/c-Rel heterodimers; only minor amounts of nuclear factor xB (NF-xB) (p50/p65) were detectable. Cotransfection of an inhibitor of NF-KB (IxB)-alpha expression vector reduced c-rayc-promoter/upstream/exon1-CAT reporter construct activity, indicating the role of Rel factor binding in c-myc basal expression in these cells. Treatment with anti-slg resulted in a rapid transient increase in the rate of c-myc gene transcription and in the binding of Rel factors. At later times, formation of p50 homodimer complexes occurred. In cotransfection analysis, p65 and c-Rel expression potently and modestly transactivated the c-myc promoter, respectively, whereas, overexpression of the p50 subunit caused a significant drop in its activity. The role of activation of Rel-family binding was demonstrated directly upon addition of the antioxidant pyrrolidinedithiocarbamate, which inhibited the anti-slg-mediated activation of the endogenous c-myc gene. Similarly, induction after anti-slg treatment of a transfected c-myc promoter was abrogated upon cotransfection of an IxB-alpha expression vector. These results implicate the Rel-family in Ig receptor-mediated signals controlling the activation of c-myc gene transcription in WEHI 231 cells, and suggest a role for this family in apoptosis of this line, which is mediated through a c-myc signaling pathway.

Nuclear factor xB (NF-xB) elements mediate control of a number of important growth regulatory genes (1, 2). We identified two nuclear factor (NF)-xB elements within the murine c-myc oncogene. One site, termed the URE, was located 1101-1081 bp upstream of the P1 promoter (3), and the second site (IRE) was localized within exon 1 at +440 to +459 bp (4). NF-xB is expressed constitutively in nuclei of mature B lymphocytes (5) and can be induced upon differentiation of pre-B to B cells (6). In non-B cells, NF-xB activity can be induced by a variety of agents, including IL-1, TNF-alpha, and phorbol ester, as well as upon infection with several viruses, such as HTLV-1 and HIV-1 (1, 2). We demonstrated that activation of NF-xB-like factors, upon IL-1 treatment of human fibroblasts or expression of the tax gene product of the HTLV-1 virus in T cells, can induce transcription of the c-myc oncogene (7, 8).

NF-xB is now known to be a family of dimeric transcription factors with subunits that contain an amino terminal stretch of ~300 amino acids that share homology with the v-Rel oncogene (9-12). Classical NF-xB is composed of a p50 and a p65 subunit. The p65 subunit contains a more potent transactivation domain than the p50 subunit. However, it binds less avidly (1, 2, 13-15). Using transient transfection in NIH 3T3 fibroblasts, we have recently demonstrated that expression of p65 alone, or of p65, in combination with p50, potently transactivates the murine c-myc promoter.

1 Abbreviations used in this paper: CAT, chloramphenicol acetyl-transferase; dm, double mutant; IkB, inhibitor of NF-xB; NF-xB, nuclear factor xB; PDTC, pyrrolidinedithiocarbamate; slg, surface Ig; URE, upstream regulatory element.

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whereas p50 and v-rel failed to transactivate, and murine c-rel transactivated only weakly (16). In addition, other Rel-related subunits have been identified, including RelB and p52 (17–20).

Treatment of immature IgM-bearing B lymphocytes with an antibody against their expressed surface Ig (slgM) resulted in cell death via apoptosis (21). The WEHI 231 lymphoma cell line (lgM, kappa) had been characterized as an immature B cell on the basis of surface markers and biological properties (22, 23). Treatment of WEHI 231 cells for 18 h with an antibody against its slgM resulted in formation of an oligosomal DNA pattern, characteristic of apoptotic fragmentation of chromatin within nuclei (24, 25). DNA synthesis ceased within 24–36 h (22, 23, 26). This anti-slg treatment also resulted in dramatic changes in expression of the c-myc oncogene that preceded DNA degradation. A 5- to 15-fold increase in c-myc RNA and protein levels between the first and second hours was followed by a rapid decline; by 8 h of treatment, the levels were well below control values (26–28). A major site of control of c-myc expression occurred at the level of gene transcription (27). Several groups have now demonstrated that overexpression or inappropriate time of expression of the c-myc gene promotes apoptosis in myeloid, T, and fibroblast cells (29–31). Using antisense oligonucleotides, Fischer et al. (32) have recently confirmed a role for c-myc expression in induction of apoptosis in the WEHI 231 line. Given our evidence of the role of Rel-related factors in the control of transcription of the c-myc gene, we sought to determine the effects of anti-slg treatment on Rel factor expression. Previously, we demonstrated that exponentially growing WEHI 231 cells expressed a number of Rel species, and that binding was significantly reduced following 24 h of anti-slg treatment (3). Here, we demonstrate that the predominant binding activity in WEHI 231 cells is p50/c-Rel. Anti-slg receptor treatment results in an early increase of binding, including classical NF-κB p50/p65, that is followed by a decrease in overall binding and subsequent appearance of p50 homodimers. Transfection analysis indicates these changes in Rel-related factor binding mediates activation and subsequent inhibition of c-myc gene transcription in this B cell line.

**Materials and Methods**

**Culture and Treatment Conditions.** WEHI 231 cells were maintained in DMEM, supplemented with 10% FCS (Gibco Laboratories, Grand Island, NY), 0.35% glucose, 0.058% glutamine, nonessential amino acids (Gibco), 100 U/ml penicillin, 100 µg/ml streptomycin, and 50 µM β-mercaptoethanol, as described previously (26). Before antibody treatment, cells were diluted to a density of 3–4 × 10⁶ cells/ml with fresh warm media and allowed to incubate for a minimum of 4–5 h. Cell cultures were incubated with 5.2 µg/ml anti-slg antibody (Cappel Laboratories, Cochranville, PA) for 1–8 h. Where indicated, cells were pretreated before antibody addition for 1 h with 0.01–2 mM pyrrolidinedithiocarbamate (PDTC) to inhibit NF-κB activation (33). The 702/3 pre-B lymphoma cells were maintained in RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% heat-inactivated FCS and 50 µM 2-mercaptoethanol. Cells were induced to differentiate with 50 nM PMA treatment for 1 h.

**Transfection Analysis.** Exponentially growing WEHI 231 cells were washed once with medium and resuspended in DMEM supplemented with 20% FCS at a concentration of 20 × 10⁶ cells/ml. Cells (250 µl) were preincubated on ice for 10 min with DNA (up to 40 µg). Cells were transfected by electroporation at 240 V and 960 μF, using a Gene Pulser (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Richmond, CA). After incubation on ice for 5 min, the cell suspension was mixed with 1.75 ml of complete medium and incubated for 10 min at room temperature. The suspensions were transferred to petri dishes and incubated at 37°C for 24 h. Cells were harvested, and the resulting extracts were normalized for total protein content by using the Bio-Rad protein quantitation kit. Equal amounts of lysates were incubated in duplicate in 2.5 μCi [3H]-acetyl coenzyme A (New England Nuclear, Boston, MA; 200 mCi/μmol), 50 µM acetyl coenzyme A, and 1.6 mM chloramphenicol for 1–2 h, and the acetylated forms were extracted with ethyl acetate and assayed by liquid scintillation counting. Standard deviation was obtained using the Student’s t test. The pL.6 Bgl chloramphenicol acetyltransferase (CAT) construct contains −1141 to +513 bp of the murine c-myc gene, containing promoter/upstream/exon 1 sequences, including both the URE and IRE (8). The double mutant pL.6 Bgl construct (dm pL.6 Bgl), prepared by the double primer site-directed mutagenesis method, contains two G to C transversions in both the URE and IRE elements, which prevents Rel factor binding and transactivation (8, 16). Vectors expressing the p50 and p65 subunits of NF-κB and inhibitor of NF-κB (IκB)-α and murine c-Rel were obtained from U. Siebenlist (National Cancer Institute [NCI], Bethesda, MD), and J. Pierce (Brandeis University, Waltham, MA), respectively (16, 18).

**Nuclear Run-on Analysis.** Nuclei were isolated from control and antibody-treated WEHI 231 cells, as described previously (27). Radiolabeled RNA was analyzed with single stranded DNA of the BamHI to HindIII fragment encoding exons 2 and 3 of the c-myc gene (myc) cloned into the M13 vector to detect mRNA synthesis; β-2 microglobulin cDNA, or M13 vector DNA, as described previously (27).

**Electrophoretic Mobility Shift Analysis.** Crude nuclear extracts were prepared by the Strauss and Varshavsky method (34). The fragment of DNA spanning Bgl II to Acc I, including base pairs −1139 to −921 relative to the PI promoter of the murine c-myc gene, was subcloned into pUC 19. This DNA, termed fragment A previously (3), includes the NF-κB upstream regulatory element (URE). DNA fragments were end labeled with the fragment of E. coli DNA polymerase I (New England Biolabs Inc., Beverly, MA) and [α-32P]dNTPs (New England Nuclear). The electrophoretic mobility shift assay was performed as follows: each 32P-labeled fragment or double-stranded oligonucleotide (25,000 cpm; ~2 ng) and 5 µg of nuclear extract were mixed in 70 mM NaCl/10 mM Hepes, pH 7.5/1 mM EDTA/1 mM dithiothreitol/0.1% Triton X-100/4% (vol/vol) glycerol/5 µg of poly(dI-dC)-poly(dI-dC) copolymer, in a final vol of 25 μl. This mixture was incubated for 30 min at 22°C. Competition with cold URE oligonucleotide demonstrated that the binding was mediated by this NF-κB element (3). Alternatively, a double stranded oligonucleotide of the κB site from the kappa light chain enhancer was used (35). For supershift experiments, antibody preparations were added and the mixture incubated as indicated in the appropriate legend. Antibody preparations against p50 and c-Rel homodimers and p65 were purchased from Santa Cruz; antibodies against p50 and c-Rel were kindly supplied by R. Sen (Brandeis University) and N. Rice (NCI), respectively. Purified IκB-α was generously provided by U. Siebenlist (NCI).
Gels were electrophoresed at 11 V/cm in a 4% or 4.5% polyacrylamide gel with TAE running buffer (6.7 mM Tris-HCl [pH 7.5], 3.3 mM sodium acetate, and 1 mM EDTA), dried, and subjected to autoradiography.

**Results**

**WEHI 231 Cells Express Multiple Rel-related Factors.** We first sought to characterize the nature of Rel-related factors binding to c-myc NF-κB elements, using the URE NF-κB element. Mobility shift analysis was performed with the 221 bp BglII–AccI fragment that spans −1139 to −921 bp relative to the P1 promoter (Fig. 1). The profiles obtained with nuclear extracts from exponentially growing WEHI 231 cells are similar to those seen previously (3). Copper phenanthroline footprinting and competition analysis has shown that formation of the complexes in bands numbered one to four and band six are due to interaction with the URE element (3). When the profile of complexes obtained with nuclear extracts from WEHI 231 cells was compared to that from 70Z/3 pre-B cells induced to differentiate to B cells with LPS treatment for 1 h, a complex that comigrated with band three was detected (3). Since it has recently been shown that this treatment causes the 70Z/3 line to express predominantly classical NF-κB (36), we sought to confirm that band three represents binding of classical NF-κB. The effects of addition of antibodies against the p65 and p50 subunits were tested (Fig. 1, A and B). Addition of a p65 antibody to binding reactions with a WEHI 231 nuclear extract resulted in a selective reduction in formation of band three (Fig. 1 A). For the p50 subunit, an antibody preparation that recognizes p50 subunits in either homodimer or heterodimer complexes was employed (Fig. 1 B). Addition of this antibody clearly prevented formation of bands two, three, and four. Inhibition of formation of band one is seen on a darker exposure (data not shown). These results indicate that band three, which is only a minor complex in WEHI 231 cells, represents binding of classical NF-κB, a heterodimer of p50 and p65. Furthermore, most of the Rel-related complexes in exponentially growing WEHI 231 that bind to the NF-κB c-myc element contain a p50 subunit.

To determine whether any of the complexes contained c-Rel, an antibody preparation that reacts with c-Rel was used. Addition of this antibody clearly prevented formation of band two, the major complex observed with nuclear extracts of WEHI 231 cells (Fig. 1 C). Thus, band two appears to represent a heterodimer of p50/c-Rel. This finding is consistent with the faster mobility of complexes formed with the URE.
oligonucleotide and extracts from COS cells expressing p50/c-Rel compared with those expressing p50/p65 (16).

Since p50 appears involved in mediating much of the binding to the c-myc elements, an antibody (Santa Cruz) was used that has been found to recognize p50 homodimers more effectively than p50 in heterodimer complexes (Fig. 1 D). Addition of this antibody to a binding reaction preferentially prevented formation of band one. Antibodies against RelB and p52 had little consistent effect on complex mobility (data not shown). Thus, the nature of the p50 binding partner of band four remains to be determined. In summary, bands one, two, and three represent p50 homodimers, and p50/c-Rel and p50/p65 heterodimers, respectively.

The c-myc Promoter in Exponentially Growing WEHI 231 Cells Is Transactivated by Rel-related Factor Expression. Since we have demonstrated that Rel-related factors can effectively transactivate the c-myc promoter (7, 8, 16), we tested whether their expression in WEHI 231 cells mediated transactivation of c-myc promoter transcription. Transfection analysis was performed with murine c-myc promoter/upstream/exon1-CAT pl.6 Bgl constructs that contained either wild-type or mutant versions of the URE and IRE NF-κB elements (8). After electroporation into exponentially growing WEHI 231 cells, the activity of wild type pl.6 Bgl was found to be threefold higher than that of the double mutant (dm pl.6 Bgl), suggesting that part of the promoter activity was due to binding of Rel-related factors (Fig. 2). Since IkB-α has been found to bind to both the p65 and c-Rel subunits and prevent transactivation, a cotransfection experiment was performed using an IkB-α expression vector. Cotransfection of a vector expressing IkB-α reduced the activity of wild-type pl.6 Bgl, in a dose-dependent fashion, to that of the double mutant pl.6 Bgl (Fig. 2). As expected, the activity of dm pl.6 Bgl was essentially unaffected by expression of IkB-α. These results indicate that Rel-factor binding plays a significant role in transcription of the c-myc promoter in exponentially growing WEHI 231 cells.

Anti-slg Treatment Induces Rel-related Factor Binding. We next sought to determine the effects of anti-slg treatment on binding of Rel-related factors and to correlate any changes with the effects of this treatment on the rate of c-myc gene transcription. Nuclei were isolated from WEHI 231 cells in exponential growth and, after 1, 2, 4, 8, 12, and 18 h of treatment with anti-slg, used in run-on and mobility shift analyses (Fig. 3). Transcription of c-myc RNA increased dramatically by 1 h after anti-slg treatment, remained elevated at 2 h, and decreased to levels somewhat below those seen in exponentially growing cells within 4 h (Fig. 3 A). Between 4 and 8 h, the rate of transcription dropped well below control values and remained depressed throughout the remainder of the time course.

Treatment with anti-slg for 1 h caused a very significant increase in binding to the 221 bp fragment. In particular, a transient increase in intensity of formation of complexes in the regions between bands two and five was noted (Fig. 3 B). Specifically, an increase was noted in bands two and three; these are better seen in the duplicate experiment shown in Fig. 3 C. By 4 h, the levels of all of the complexes, except for band two, were somewhat below those seen in extracts from control cells. Between 8 and 12 h of treatment, an increase in formation of band one was seen. To estimate the extent of the increase in binding after 1 h of anti-slg treatment, mobility shift analysis was performed with an oligonucleotide containing a single NF-κB element, under very low resolving conditions, to yield a single band; an approximate twofold increase in binding was observed (data not shown). Thus, an increase in overall binding of Rel-related factors parallels the early increase in the rate of c-myc gene transcription after anti-slg treatment, while the decrease in the rate of transcription is paralleled by an initial drop in overall binding and a later increase in appearance of p50 homodimers.

Expression of p65 and c-Rel Activates the c-myc Promoter Transcription. To test whether activation of Rel-related factors upon anti-slg treatment can significantly enhance transcription of the c-myc promoter, cotransfection analysis was performed using the pl.6 Bgl constructs and vectors expressing either the p65 or murine c-Rel subunits. Increasing amounts of p65 expression vector stimulated activity of wild-type pl.6 Bgl up to sixfold, while higher doses displayed somewhat reduced activation (Fig. 4), as seen previously in NIH 3T3 cells (16). The mutant pl.6 Bgl was unaffected by p65 expression, indicating that the activation is due to binding to the NF-κB elements, as expected. Expression of murine c-Rel was able to modestly induce activity of the c-myc promoter; an increase of 1.8-fold was noted with wild-type pl.6 Bgl (Fig. 5). These results are similar to those seen upon cotransfection into NIH 3T3 cells, which express only minimal constitutive binding levels of Rel-related factors. Thus activation of Rel-related factors upon anti-slg treatment can significantly

![Figure 2](https://example.com/figure2.png)

**Figure 2.** Mutation of the NF-κB sites and expression of IkB-α inhibits c-myc promoter activity. Exponentially growing WEHI 231 cells were electroporated in duplicate with 30 μg pl.6 Bgl (filled bars), or with dm pl.6 Bgl (open bars), in the absence (bars 1) or presence of 1, 5, 10 μg of an IkB-α expression vector (bars 2-4, respectively), and enough pUC19 DNA to make up a final total amount of 40 μg DNA. Extracts were assayed for CAT activity and the data presented relative to the pl.6 Bgl alone.

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Figure 3. Anti-Ig treatment of WEHI 231 cells transiently activates c-myc gene transcription and Rel-related binding. (A) Nuclear run-on analysis. Nuclei were isolated from WEHI 231 cells at the indicated time points and the radiolabeled RNA products analyzed with single-stranded DNA of the BamHI to HindIII fragment encoding exons two and three of the c-myc gene (myc) cloned into the M13 vector to detect mRNA synthesis; β-2 microglobulin cDNA and M13 vector DNA. A slight overloading of the label was apparent at the 12 h time point. (B) Mobility shift analysis. Extracts were prepared from WEHI 231 cell nuclei, isolated above in A, and used in mobility shift analysis as described in the legend to Fig. 1. (C) Mobility shift analysis of the early effects of anti-Ig treatment. Nuclear extracts were prepared from WEHI 231 cells isolated at the indicated time points and equal amounts of protein used in mobility shift analysis, as described above.

Figure 4. Expression of p65 potently enhances c-myc promoter activity. Exponentially growing WEHI 231 cells were electroporated in duplicate with 10 μg pl.6 Bgl (filled bars) or dm pl.6 Bgl (open bars) in the absence (bars 1) or presence of increasing levels of a p65 expression vector (bars 2–5 contained 1, 5, 10, and 20 μg, respectively) and enough pUC19 DNA to make a final amount of 40 μg DNA. Extracts were assayed for CAT activity, as above in Fig. 3. The data are presented relative to the value obtained in the absence of p65 expression vector for both the wild-type and dm pl.6 Bgl constructs.

Expression of p50 Represses c-myc Promoter Transcription in WEHI 231 Cells. Expression of the p50 subunit of NF-κB, which can bind effectively as a homodimer to many NF-κB elements, including the URE (16), has been found to transactivate in vivo only rarely (16). To determine whether expression of p50 is able to affect the activity of the c-myc promoter in WEHI 231 cells, a cotransfection experiment was performed (Fig. 6). Expression of p50 caused a dose-dependent decrease in activity of the pl.6 Bgl, in contrast to the results we obtained in NIH 3T3 cells where it had little effect on the activity of pl.6 Bgl (16). This result suggests that overexpression of p50 in WEHI 231 cells, which can compete for binding of more active Rel-related factors, decreases the activity of the c-myc promoter. This suggests that the appearance of p50 homodimers between 8 and 12 h after anti-Ig treatment can negatively affect c-myc expression.

Inhibition of Rel-related Factor Activation Prevents Induction of c-myc RNA Levels. Schreck, Baeuerle, and coworkers (33) have shown that the antioxidant PDTC selectively inhibits activation of Rel-related factors. To measure the effects of PDTC addition, WEHI 231 cells were incubated for 1 h in media containing increasing concentrations of PDTC, ranging from 0.01–1.0 mM, and then treated for 1 h with anti-Ig. Mobility shift analysis indicated that pretreatment with PDTC prevented Rel-related factor induction in a dose-dependent manner.
Expression of c-Rel enhances c-myc promoter activity. Exponentially growing WEHI 231 cells were electroporated in duplicate with 10 μg p1.6 Bgl (filled bars) or dm p1.6 Bgl (open bars) in the absence (bars 1) or presence of 5, 10, and 20 μg (bars 2-4, respectively) of a murine c-Rel expression vector. The data are presented as above in Fig. 4.

Preincubation with PDTC inhibited the transient induction of c-myc mRNA levels. To confirm the specificity of the effects on c-myc expression and to evaluate the early effects of PDTC on cell growth, the Northern blot was probed for histone H3.2 mRNA, an S-phased expressed RNA (37). No changes in expression of this mRNA resulted from the PDTC treatment. Furthermore, there were no significant differences in the major proteins produced when these cytoplasmic RNA preparations were used to prime a rabbit reticulocyte cell-free system (data not shown). Thus PDTC, a selective inhibitor of Rel-related factor activation, blocks the increase in c-myc gene expression in WEHI 231 cells induced by anti-Ig treatment, which is consistent with the transfection analysis.

Mutation or IκB Expression Prevents Activation of the c-myc Promoter after Anti-Ig Treatment. As an additional test of the role of Rel-factor activation in the induction of c-myc gene transcription, we tested the effects of mutation and of cotransfection of the IκB-α vector on the ability of anti-Ig treatment to activate p1.6 Bgl. WEHI 231 cells were analyzed 6 h after anti-Ig treatment to allow for protein translation of induced CAT RNA (Fig. 8). As seen above, the activity of the wild-type p1.6 Bgl was higher than that of dm p1.6 Bgl. A 2.5-fold induction was seen with the wild-type p1.6 Bgl construct. In contrast, anti-Ig treatment failed to induce the double mutant. Furthermore, coexpression of IκB-α blocked the activation of p1.6 Bgl mediated by anti-Ig, but had essentially no effect on dm p1.6 Bgl. These results indicate that the induction of Rel-related factors after anti-Ig treatment plays a role in the activation of c-myc promoter transcription in WEHI 231 cells.

Discussion

Here we have demonstrated that the murine B cell lymphoma line WEHI 231 (IgM, kappa) expresses multiple nuclear Rel-related complexes that bind to the NF-κB elements and regulate transactivation of the c-myc gene. Furthermore, the changes in expression of this family of factors after anti-Ig treatment plays a role in the transient increase and subsequent decrease in c-myc gene transcription, which precedes apoptosis of these cells. In exponentially growing WEHI 231 cells, the predominant nuclear complex binding to the c-myc URE NF-κB element was p50/c-Rel heterodimer, and the
level of classical NF-κB binding was very low. Comigrating complexes of similar relative intensities were seen with the DNA fragment containing the second c-myc NF-κB element, the IRE (data not shown; reference 4). The binding of these Rel-related factors appeared to functionally transactivate c-myc expression, since expression of the inhibitor protein IkB-α reduced the activity of a transfected c-myc promoter significantly, as did site-directed mutations in the two NF-κB elements. Treatment of WEHI 231 cells with anti-slg resulted in a transient increase in binding of c-Rel factors that was followed by a decline in binding and a subsequent appearance of p50 homodimers. Cotransfection analysis indicated that the early activation of p65 and c-Rel-containing complexes would result in a transient peak in c-myc expression, while induction of p50 would inhibit transcription of this gene. This was further indicated by pretreatment of WEHI 231 cells with the antioxidant PDTC, which prevented induction of Rel-factor binding and blocked the increase in c-myc mRNA levels that normally follow anti-slg treatment, and by the ability of mutations in the URE and IRE sites and of expression of IkB-α to prevent the anti-slg-mediated activation of c-myc promoter transcription. Taken together, these findings indicate that Rel family expression contributes to the constitutive level of c-myc gene expression in WEHI 231 B cells, as well as to the changes in expression of this gene induced by anti-slg treatment of this line.

Since WEHI 231 cells express the κ light chain gene, we were surprised to determine that the predominant species was p50/c-Rel. Similar results have recently been reported by Verma, Baltimore, Rice and their co-workers (36, 38, 39). These workers have presented evidence that Rel-family expression proceeds in two stages during pre-B cell B cell development. They have shown that in pre-B cells induced to differentiation to B cells (e.g., 70Z/3 line), activation of p50/p65 occurs (36, 38). Whereas in early B cells, p50/c-Rel was predominant. Thus, a switch that is presumably developmentally regulated has apparently occurred. Thus, our finding that p50/c-Rel is the predominant complex binding to the c-myc URE in WEHI 231 is consistent with these other reports. Furthermore, binding of p50/p65 to the URE in exponentially growing WEHI 231 cells was very minimal. Our ability to detect this complex probably reflects the inability of the URE sequence to bind classical NF-κB, as shown by Rosen and co-workers (40). Anti-slg treatment resulted in a significant induction of Rel-factor binding that activates transcription of the c-myc gene. While induction of c-myc does not lead to proliferation of the WEHI 231 cells, a similar induction of Rel binding has been reported previously in normal splenic B lymphocytes after treatment with anti-Ig (35). In this case, the B cells are induced to proliferate. The work presented here suggests that anti-Ig receptor-mediated activation of Rel-factor binding may play a role in induction of proliferation of normal B lymphocytes.

The changes in binding of Rel-related factors also appears to play a role in the decrease in the rate of c-myc gene transcription. To date, the Rel-family has not been associated with direct negative effects on transcription in mammalian cells. The initial drop in c-myc gene transcription can be related in part to a loss of binding. Between 8 and 12 h, a significant increase in binding of p50 homodimers (band 1) was noted. This increase could be due to a selective decline in expression of the other subunits (e.g., c-Rel and p65) or a decrease in expression of the inhibitor protein Bcl-3, which has been found to selectively complex with p50 subunits and prevents their binding to DNA (41). We have found that homodimers of p50 fail to transactivate the c-myc promoter in NIH 3T3 cells, which express only low levels of Rel-related factors (16). Thus, in WEHI 231 cells, the observed inhibition by overexpression of p50 is most likely due to competition for binding of active factors, such as classical NF-κB with p50, which lacks a transactivation domain.

The c-myc gene has been implicated in programmed cell death. Overexpression of c-myc accelerates apoptosis after IL-3 deprivation of the 32D IL-3-dependent myeloid cell line and upon growth arrest, either by serum deprivation, isoleucine deprivation, or thymidine block of 3T3 fibroblasts (29, 31). Addition of an antisense c-myc oligonucleotide inhibits receptor-mediated apoptosis in immature T cells and some T cell hybridomas (30, 42). More recently, the anti-slg-induced apoptosis of WEHI 231 cells has been shown to be similarly blocked by addition of an antisense c-myc oligonucleotide, although the disappearance of the c-myc protein was not apparent (reference 32, our unpublished observations). Our results suggest a possible role for NF-κB-like factor expression in the receptor-mediated activation of the pathway leading to programmed cell death in WEHI 231 B cells. Interestingly, high levels of c-Rel expression have been associated with programmed cell death in the developing avian embryo and in bone marrow cells in vitro (43). Experiments are in progress to test the role of Rel-family expression in induction of apoptosis in B cell models of tolerance.
We thank Drs. R. Bravo, J. Pierce, N. Rice, R. Sen, and U. Siebenblinist for generously providing antibody preparations and expression vectors for RelB, c-Rel, p50, p65, and IxB-α, and T. Rothstein for the κB oligonucleotide.

This work was supported by grants from the National Institutes of Health CA36355, training grant AG-00115, and from the Associazione Italiana per la Ricerca sul Cancro.

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Received for publication 8 August 1994 and in revised form 26 October 1994.

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