

Differences in Extracellular Matrix Protein Accumulation between TGF β Isoforms in Trabecular Meshwork

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Abstract

Primary open-angle glaucoma (POAG) is a prevalent formation of glaucoma primarily caused by the accumulation of extracellular matrix (ECM) in the trabecular meshwork (TM). The abnormal deposition of ECM components leads to TM fibrosis and elevated intraocular pressure. Transforming growth factor β (TGF β) is a crucial driver of ECM accumulation and is overexpressed in TM tissues of POAG patients. However, there is no information available about the unique functions of TGF β 1 and TGF β 2 isoforms in TM fibrosis. In this current study, we have discovered that both TGF β 1 and TGF β 2, at the same concentration, contribute to excessive ECM protein deposition in human TM cells. Relative to TGF β 1, TGF β 2 exhibits heightened efficacy in instigating the accumulation of ECM proteins and the expression of TGF β receptor (TGFBR) 2. Notably, this proclivity for ECM protein induction by TGF β 2 was not observed in A549 and ARPE-19 cells. Conclusively, our results indicate that TGF β 2 contributes significantly to the ECM protein accumulation specifically in TM, potentially associated with alterations in TGFBR2.

Keywords: Extracellular matrix, Trabecular meshwork, Transforming growth factor β , Transforming growth factor β receptors, Primary open-angle glaucoma.

Introduction

Glaucoma is a type of advanced optic nerve disease and it is the world's leading cause of irreversible blindness. The disease is commonly characterized by slow progressive degeneration of retinal ganglion cells and development of axon recession, which causes optic disc damage and is associated with decreased vision. It's estimated that 112 million individuals globally would suffer from glaucoma by 2040 [1]. A prevalent kind of glaucoma known as primary open angle glaucoma (POAG) is defined by damage to the characteristic glaucomatous optic papilla and visual field, as well as an intraocular pressure (IOP) of 21 mmHg or above in at least one eye that appears normal [2,3]. The primary factor contributing to the rise of IOP in POAG is the trabecular meshwork's (TM) aqueous humor (AH) outflow resistance, which is intimately linked to the accumulation of extracellular matrix (ECM) proteins and a

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decrease in phagocytosis [4-7].

Transforming growth factor β (TGF β), a member of the transforming growth factor superfamily has three isoforms: TGF β 1, TGF β 2, and TGF β 3. All members can combine with TGF β receptor (TGFBR) 2 and then recruit and activate TGFBR1, which activates the TGF β signaling pathway [8,9]. Multifunctional mediator TGF β influences the proliferation, migration, adhesion, differentiation and apoptosis of various cell types, including neutrophils, dendritic cells, activated T and B cells, macrophages and immature hematopoietic cells [10, 11]. It is commonly recognized that TGF β is a critical factor regulating ECM-protein accumulation and it is widely expressed in fibrotic eye, kidney, liver, heart, lung and other tissues [8,12-18]. In intraocular tissues, induction of TM cells by TGF β 1 and TGF β 2 can lead to epithelial-mesenchymal transition and ECM-protein accumulation [19-21]. During fibrosis, the TGF β isoforms have the same function and induce fibroblast activation and ECM-protein accumulation, and inhibit ECM-protein degradation by activating the classical Smad signaling pathway [8,12,15-17].

Another function of TGF β 1 is the promotion or inhibition of microRNA (miRNA) changes to stabilize mesenchymal gene translation and reduce antifibrotic pathways [22]. In addition to fibrosis, TGF β 1 protects cardiomyocyte apoptosis by participating in the p42/p44 mitogen-activated protein kinase signaling pathway [23]. TGF β 2 induces expression and secretion of thrombospondins (TSP)-1, which activate TGF β 2 that then binds to many ECM proteins such as type IV collagen (COL-IV), fibronectin (FN) and laminin (LN) in vivo. TSP-1 function can be inhibited by TSP-2 competitive binding to TGF β 2 [24, 25]. Accordingly, there may be a local positive feedback autocrine loop where increased production of TGF β 2 causes TSP-1 secretion, and subsequently activates ECM-sequestered TGF β 2, which is competitively inhibited by TSP-2 [26].

TGFBR has three isoforms, namely TGFBR1, TGFBR2, and TGFBR3. Although TGFBR3 lacks kinase activity, TGFBR1 and TGFBR2 are dual-specificity kinases, functioning as both tyrosine and serine/threonine kinases [9]. TGFBR1 plays a pivotal role as the essential mediator for transmitting extracellular signals to the TGF β signaling pathway, and it is susceptible to phosphorylation at numerous sites [9]. Activated TGFBR1 can phosphorylate downstream Smad2 and Smad3, or noncanonical signaling, such as Rho-ROCK, PI3K-Akt, P38/JNK [27]. TGFBR2 is a constitutively active kinase that does not depend on ligand binding, phosphorylation, TGFBR1 or other receptors [9]. The canonical TGF β signal is stimulated when TGF β combines with TGFBR2, thereby recruiting TGFBR1 which is then phosphorylated by TGFBR2, and further phosphorylates Smad2/3 [28-31].

According to the ECM-protein accumulation of TM, our research group successfully tested various types of clinically confirmed patients with glaucoma including: acute angle closure glaucoma, chronic angle closure glaucoma, primary angle closure glaucoma and POAG during ophthalmic surgery. The concentration of bioactive TGF β 2 was quantified utilizing the ELISA technique [32]. The research

findings demonstrated that the expression of TGF β 2 is specifically elevated in the AH of individuals diagnosed with POAG, aligning with previous studies on this subject matter [33-35]. Furthermore, our study provided evidence that the administration of salidroside and osthole effectively mitigated the TGF β 2-induced accumulation of ECM proteins in human TM cells and resulted in a reduction in IOP [36,37]. The above-mentioned results indicate that TGF β 2 causes the accumulation of ECM proteins (COL-IV, FN and LN), which have the potential to increase AH outflow resistance and further cause IOP elevation in patients diagnosed with POAG [24,38,39].

The eyes of individuals diagnosed with POAG exhibit significantly elevated levels of TGF β 2 expression. Nevertheless, limited studies have reported an enhanced expression of TGF β 1 in the TM tissues or AH of patients diagnosed with POAG, and there is no study on the differences between the two isoforms in promoting ECM-protein accumulation in TM [33,35,40-44]. Therefore, it is imperative to investigate the effect of inhibiting TGF β isoforms on accumulation of ECM proteins in TM for the potential treatment of POAG. We aimed to compare the differences in the expression of COL-IV, FN and LN proteins in human TM cells after induction by TGF β 1 and TGF β 2 isoforms, and to preliminarily explore the mechanisms causing the differences in the ECM protein levels.

Materials and Methods

Ethical approval

All experiments complied with the Declaration of Helsinki and trabecular meshwork samples from patients were acquired from Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine's Ninth People's Hospital after the institutional research ethics board granted its clearance (No. SH9H-2019-TK204-1)

Cell culture and treatment

Primary human TM (HTM) cells were derived from human trabecular meshwork tissue obtained from ophthalmic surgery and processed in passages 3 to 9. The cells were cultured and identified essentially as described in detail previously [36,37,45]. The human lung cancer cell line A549 and human retinal pigment epithelial cell line ARPE-19 were cultured at 37°C in 5% CO₂ using DMEM medium containing 10% FBS.

Induction of TGF β 1 and TGF β 2

All treatments were performed when cells made up approximately 80% of the dish. Cells were serum-starved for 24 h using Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium without FBS. Subsequently, the cells were induced by TGF β 1 or TGF β 2 (5 ng/ml, MedChemExpress) for 48 h.

Real time quantitative PCR (RT-qPCR)

The RNA extraction from HTM cells was performed using Trizol (Takara, Tokyo, Japan) followed by cDNA synthesis using the PrimeScript™ RT Reagent Kit (Takara) according to the manufacturer's instructions. RT-qPCR was performed using SYBR Green Master Mix (Qiagen, Inc., Valencia, CA,

USA) to assess mRNA levels. The internal control human glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH) was used to standardize the results from HTM cells. Table 1 displays the primer sequences that were employed in the qPCR experiments.

Western blot analysis (WB)

The RIPA lysis buffer (Invitrogen) was used with protease and phosphatase inhibitor cocktails (5872; Cell Signaling Technology, CST) to isolate cellular content from HTM cells. The operation procedure has been described in previous study [36,37]. Subsequently, using the ECL Plus Western Blot Detection Kit (Tanon), the membranes were processed using the Omni-ECL™ Femto Light Chemiluminescence Kit (Epizyme Biotech, China), scanned, and then quantified by gray values using ImageJ software. Primary antibodies

included COL-IV (Abcam), FN (Abcam), LN (Abcam) and rabbit GAPDH polyclonal antibody (CST). Total antibodies were diluted with Antibody Signal Enhancer (Merck) or Universal Antibody Diluent (New Cell & Molecular Biotech, NCM).

Immunocytochemistry (ICC)

In 24-well plates, HTM cells were inserted on coverslips, fixed with 4% PFA for 30 min at 4°C, permeabilized with 0.5% Triton X-100, and blocked for 1 h at 4°C with 10% goat serum. Subsequently, the primary antibodies (COL-IV, FN and LN polyclonal antibody) and fluorescent secondary antibody (Invitrogen) were added to cells as described in previously research [36,37]. Finally, the fluorescence images were captured under the fluorescence microscope (Nikon).

Target Genes	RT-PCR Primer Sequences	
	Forward Primer (5'-3')	Reverse Primer (5'-3')
FN (human)	TGACAAGCAGACCAGCTCAG	TTGGTGGGCTGACATTCTCC
LN (human)	CTAATCCTCGGGGTTGCACA	CGCCACCCATCCTCATCAAT
COL-IV (human)	GGCTGGTGAGCCAGGTTTAA	TTTGCGCCCAGGTATCCTTT
GAPDH (human)	CGAGATCCCTCCAAAATCAA	GTCTTCTGGGTGGCAGTGAT

Table 1: The Primer Sequences for RT-PCR.

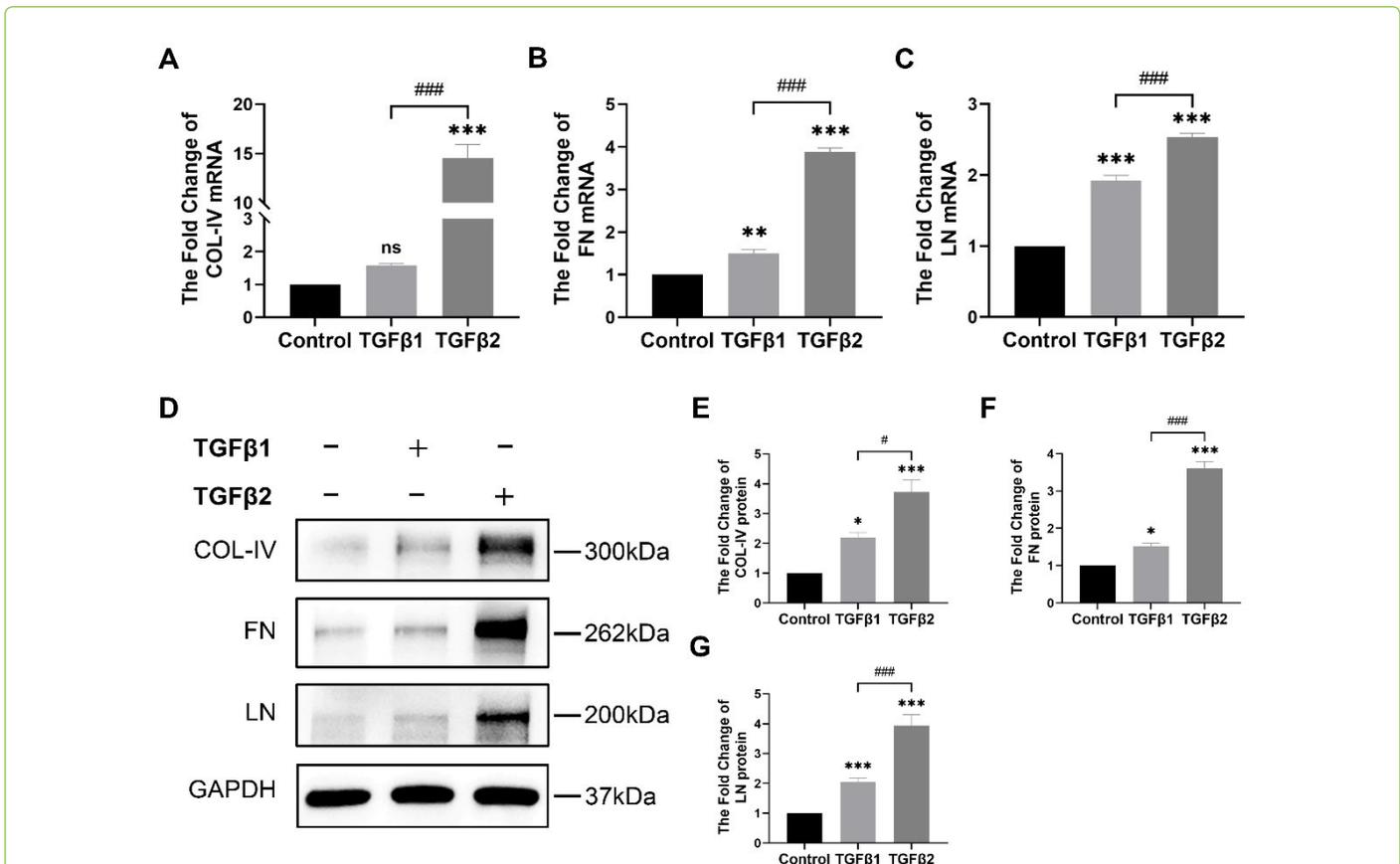


Figure 1: TGFβ1 and TGFβ2 effects on ECM expression in HTM cells. TGFβ2 has stronger effect on ECM than TGFβ1. The mRNA level of COL-IV(A), FN (B) and LN (C) in HTM cells with TGFβ1 and TGFβ2 treatment. (D) The ECM proteins in TGFβ1 and TGFβ2-treated HTM cells as determined by WB. The statistical result of WB regarding COL-IV (E), FN (F) and LN (G) proteins. All results used 2 HTM cell strains. Error bars: mean ± SEM (n = 3-5). *P < 0.05, **P < 0.01, ***P < 0.001 compared to control, #P < 0.05, ###P < 0.001 compared to TGFβ1, ns = no statistical significance, one-way ANOVA test.

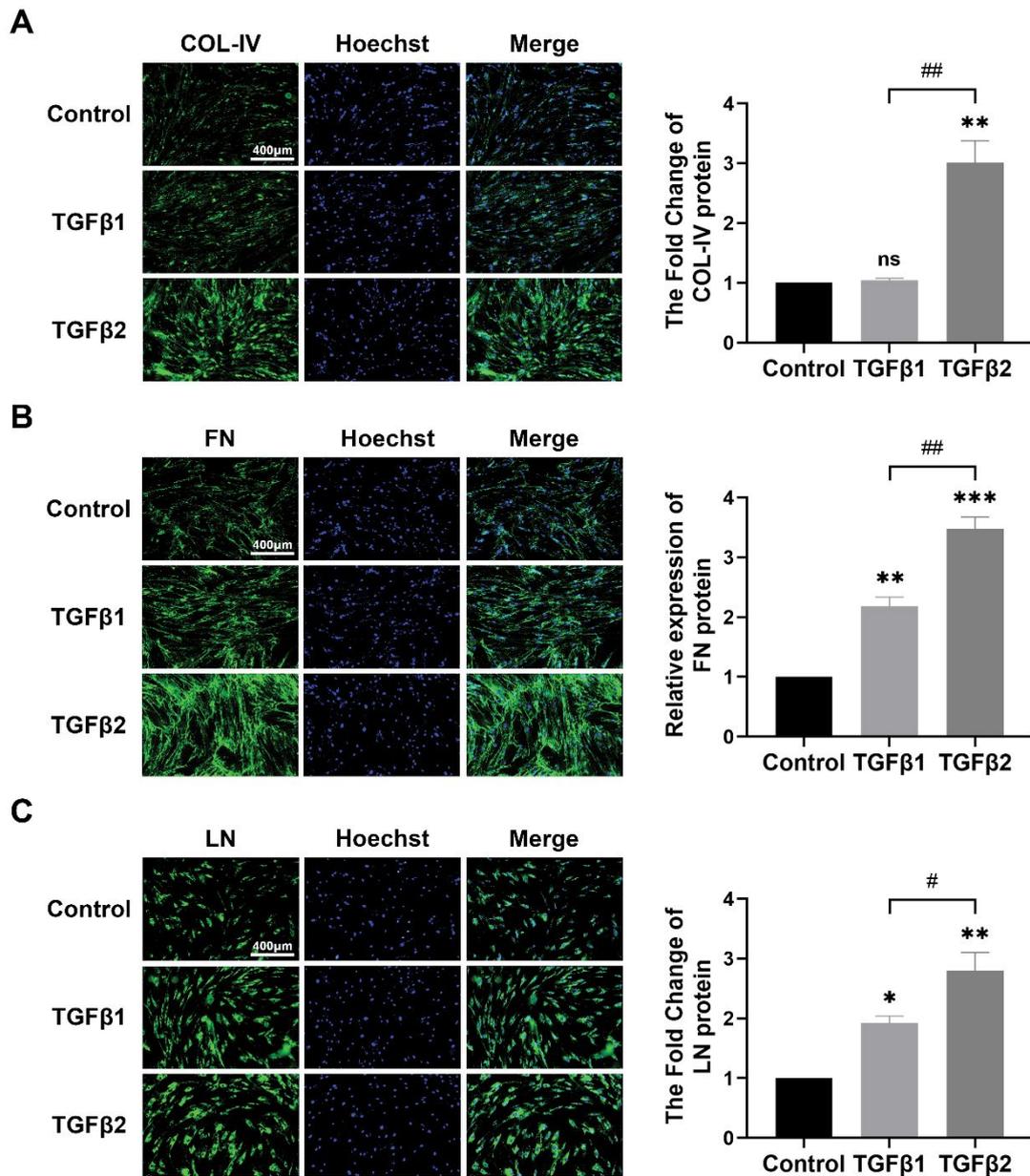


Figure 2: TGFβ1 and TGFβ2 effects on ECM immunofluorescence in HTM cells. TGFβ2 has a stronger effect on extracellular matrix proteins than TGFβ1. The COL-IV(A), FN (B) and LN (C) proteins were detected by ICC of HTM cells with TGFβ1 and TGFβ2 treatment. The data were analyzed by Image J. All results used 3 HTM cell strains. Error bars: mean ± SEM (n = 3). *P < 0.05, **P < 0.01, ***P < 0.001 compared to control, #P < 0.05, ##P < 0.01 compared to TGFβ1, ns = no statistical significance, one-way ANOVA test. Scale bars: 400µm.

Statistical analysis

Mean ± standard error of mean (SEM) was used to express the data. P < 0.05 denoted that the difference was statistically significant in one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Turkey’s test for comparisons among several groups of experimental data. For every study, n ≥ 3.

Results

TGFβ2 had a greater effect than TGFβ1 did on ECM proteins in HTM cells

In order to explore the distinct impacts of TGFβ1 and

TGFβ2 induction on ECM protein expression, we analyzed the variations of three ECM proteins following TGFβ1 and TGFβ2 treatment. TGFβ1 and TGFβ2 were applied to HTM cells for 48 h at a dose of 5 ng/mL, whereas no TGFβ therapy was given to the control group. The RNA was extracted from the treated cells, reverse transcribed to obtain cDNA, and then used for RT-qPCR analysis to measure the mRNA levels of COL-IV, FN, and LN. WB and ICC were employed to assess the differences in ECM protein expression levels. As depicted in figure 1A-C, with exception of COL-IV, the mRNA levels of ECM were markedly elevated in HTM cells following TGFβ1 stimulation compared with control. Simultaneously,

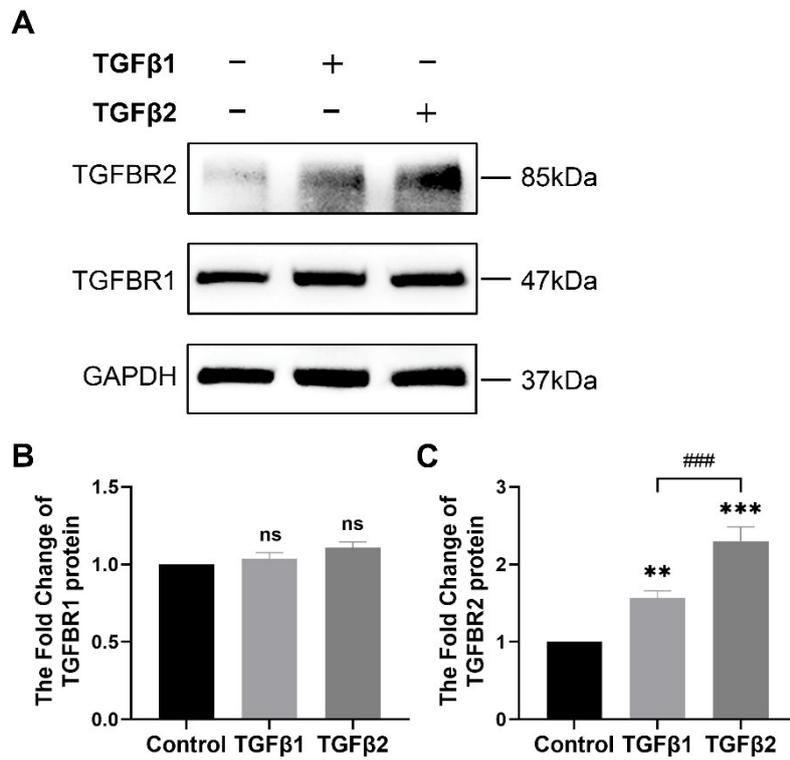


Figure 3: TGFβ1 and TGFβ2 effects on TGFBRs expression in HTM cells. TGFβ2 has a stronger effect on TGFβ receptor 2 than TGFβ1. (A) WB was utilized to measure the TGFBR1 and TGFBR2 protein levels. The protein level of TGFBR1 (B) and TGFBR2 (C). All results used 2 HTM cell strains. Error bars: mean ± SEM (n = 4-8). **P < 0.01, ***P < 0.001 compared to control, ##P < 0.01 compared to TGFβ1, ns = no statistical significance, one-way ANOVA test.

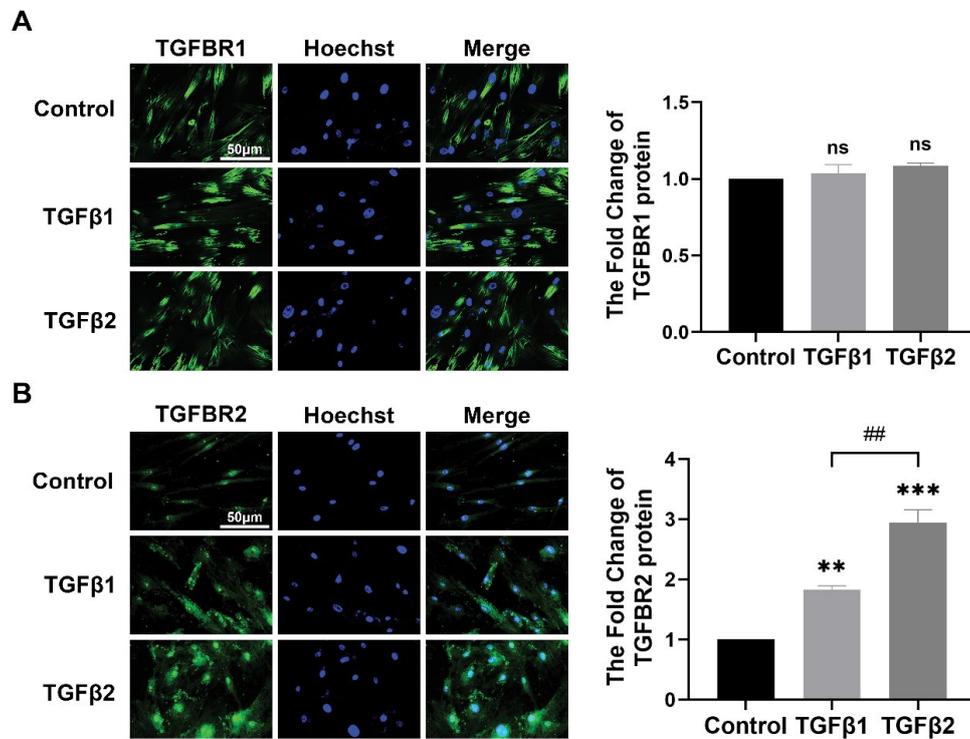


Figure 4: TGFβ1 and TGFβ2 effects on TGFBRs immunofluorescence in HTM cells. TGFβ2 has a stronger effect on TGFβ receptor 2 than TGFβ1. ICC shows the protein level of TGFBR1 (A) and TGFBR2 (B) in HTM cells with TGFβ1 and TGFβ2 treatment. The data were analyzed by Image J. All results used 3 HTM cell strains. Error bars: mean ± SEM (n = 6-8). **P < 0.01, ***P < 0.001 compared to control, ##P < 0.01 compared to TGFβ1, ns = no statistical significance, one-way ANOVA test. Scale bars: 50μm.

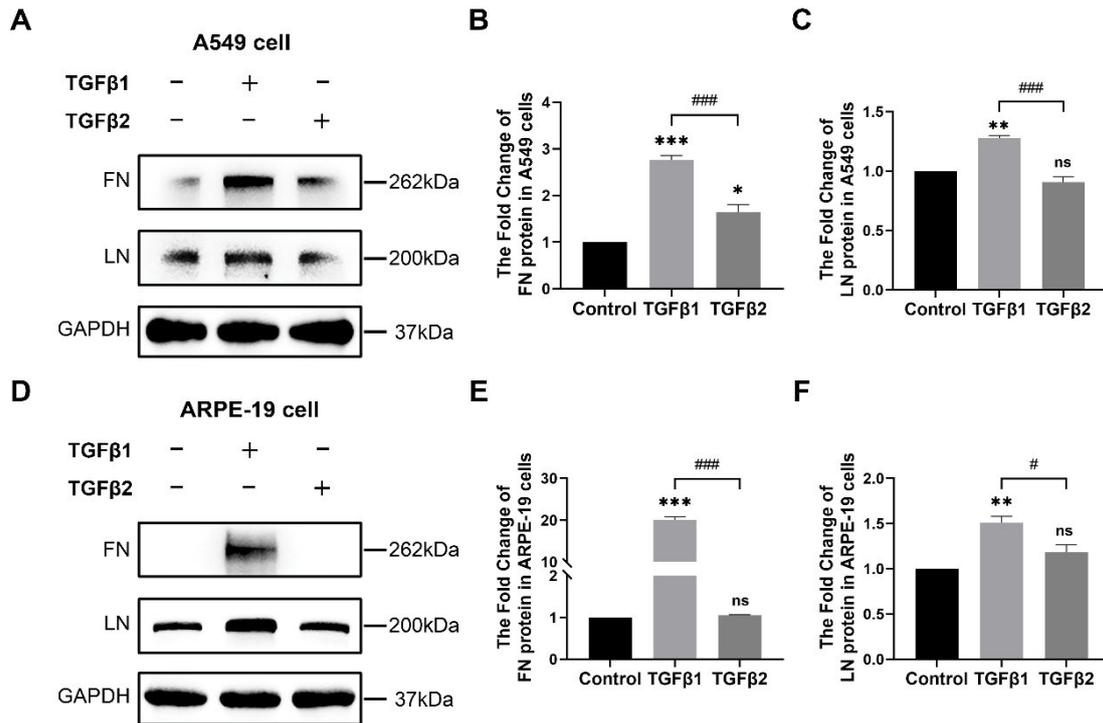


Figure 5: TGFβ1 and TGFβ2 effects on ECM expression in A549 and ARPE-19 cells. TGFβ1 has stronger effect on ECM than TGFβ2. (A) The ECM proteins in TGFβ1 and TGFβ2-treated A549 cells as determined by WB. The statistical result of WB regarding FN (B) and LN (C) proteins. (D) The ECM proteins in TGFβ1 and TGFβ2-treated ARPE-19 cells as determined by WB. The statistical result of WB regarding FN (E) and LN (F) proteins. All results used 3 A549 and ARPE-19 cell strains. Error bars: mean ± SEM (n = 3). *P < 0.05, **P < 0.01, ***P < 0.001 compared to control, #P < 0.05, ###P < 0.001 compared to TGFβ1, ns = no statistical significance, one-way ANOVA test.

all three ECM mRNA levels increased upon TGFβ2 treatment. Furthermore, compared to TGFβ1, the ECM mRNA levels in the TGFβ2 group were considerably higher (FN: 2.387 ± 0.005 -fold, $P < 0.0001$; LN: 0.617 ± 0.024 -fold, $P = 0.0004$; COL-IV: 12.955 ± 1.287 -fold, $P < 0.0001$ compared to the TGFβ1 group). Figure 1D-G demonstrated that COL-IV, FN, and LN protein levels were significantly upregulated after induction by both TGFβ isoforms in HTM cells. Nonetheless, the TGFβ2 group had greater quantities of ECM proteins than the TGFβ1 group did (FN: 2.078 ± 0.118 -fold, $P < 0.0001$; LN: 1.882 ± 0.231 -fold, $P = 0.0002$; COL-IV: 1.531 ± 0.235 -fold, $P = 0.0032$ compared to the TGFβ1 group). Similar results were observed in the ICC experiment (Figure 2) (FN: 1.291 ± 0.050 -fold, $P = 0.0018$; LN: 0.875 ± 0.187 -fold, $P = 0.0361$; COL-IV: 1.971 ± 0.325 -fold, $P = 0.0014$ compared to the TGFβ1 group). These findings indicate that TGFβ2 exerts a greater effect than TGFβ1 on ECM protein expression levels.

TGFβ2 had a stronger effect than TGFβ1 did on TGFβR2 in HTM cells

To ascertain the reason for the increased impact of TGFβ2 on ECM-protein accumulation in comparison to TGFβ1, the expression of TGFβR1 and TGFβR2 in HTM cells were analyzed. As shown in figure 3 and 4, the TGFβR2 protein was upregulated by both TGFβ isoforms, and the increased expression of TGFβR2 treated with TGFβ2 was more significant than that treated with TGFβ1 (WB: 0.731 ± 0.093 -fold, $P = 0.0005$; ICC: 1.120 ± 0.141 -fold, $P < 0.0001$ compared to TGFβ1), whereas the TGFβR1 protein had no change

among the three groups. These findings demonstrate that TGFβ isoforms cause different ECM-protein accumulation, and the difference is dependent on the differences in TGFβR2 expression stimulated by the TGFβ isoforms.

TGFβ1 had a greater effect than TGFβ2 did on ECM proteins in A549 and ARPE-19 cells

To investigate whether the enhanced effect of TGFβ2 is specific to HTM cells, we employed the same methodology to evaluate A549 and ARPE-19 cells. As depicted in figure 5A-C, TGFβ1 administration to A549 cells resulted in an increase in FN and LN proteins, whereas TGFβ2 only upregulated FN protein, and the effect was less pronounced than that of TGFβ1 (1.116 ± 0.061 -fold, $P = 0.0008$ compared with TGFβ2 group). A similar trend was observed in ARPE-19 cells, where TGFβ1 exhibited a comparable effect (FN: 19.037 ± 0.729 -fold, $P < 0.0001$; LN: 0.323 ± 0.008 -fold, $P = 0.0243$; figure 5D-F). These results imply that after inducing TGFβ, the ECM protein increase in A549 and ARPE-19 cells is different from that in HTM cells.

Discussion

The main characteristic of TM in POAG is the increased deposition of ECM proteins such as FN, COL-I, -III, -V, -VI, -XI, -XII, and -XIV [46,47]. TGFβ is the main pathological mechanism for the elevation of outflow resistance in TM [48]. POAG develops after excessive synthesis and deposition of ECM proteins in TM and a further increase in IOP [49-51]. In the current investigation, we discovered that HTM cells

treated with TGF β had considerably higher expression levels of FN, LN, and COL-IV, and the ECM-protein accumulation induced by TGF β 2 was higher than TGF β 1 induced (Figure 1 and 2), which indicated that TGF β 2 had a greater effect on ECM-protein accumulation than TGF β 1 did in HTM cells.

Herein, we explored whether the efficiency of ECM-protein accumulation induced by two TGF β isoforms is due to the differential expression of TGFBR1 and/or TGFBR2. We found that TGF β 1 and TGF β 2 had no effect on TGFBR1, whereas the expression of TGFBR2 was markedly upregulated and the efficiency of TGF β 2 was better than that of TGF β 1 (Figure 3 and 4). Accordingly, we hypothesized that the ECM proteins expression after TGF β 1 induction was lower than that after TGF β 2 treatment in HTM cells due to the high expression of TGFBR2 induced by TGF β 2, which further phosphorylates TGFBR1 and then stimulates the Smads signal pathway.

In order to ascertain the specificity of TGF β 2's predominant efficacy for HTM cells in ECM accumulation, a comparative analysis involving two TGF β isoforms was undertaken on alternative cellular models. Specifically, A549, representing a human lung cancer cell line, and ARPE-19, a human retinal pigment epithelial cell line, were subjected to further investigation. Results demonstrated that in A549 cells, TGF β 1 stimulation significantly upregulated the FN and LN proteins expression levels, whereas TGF β 2 only increased FN protein expression. These results align with earlier research conducted by [52,53]. Similarly, TGF β 1 exhibited the ability to enhance FN and LN protein expression in ARPE-19 cells, as reported by, while TGF β 2 did not have the same effect (Figure 5). These results are distinct from those observed in HTM cells, and no researches have previously compared the effects of TGF β 1 and TGF β 2 on ECM protein accumulation [54].

This is the first study to report a comparison of TGF β 1 and TGF β 2 in relation to ECM-protein accumulation. TGF β 2 promoted more accumulation of ECM proteins in HTM cells than TGF β 1 did. However, the specific mechanisms behind the differences between the two TGF β isoforms was not fully elucidated. The study focused on the expression of TGFBR and not the degree of TGFBR turnover on the cell membrane surface. Nevertheless, literature has indicated that TGF β 1 has the capacity to increase the levels of two TGF β isoforms in HaCaT keratinocytes and human lung cancer A549 cells [55]. The precise molecular and cellular mechanisms for TGF β isoforms will be explored in future research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study indicates that TGF β 2 significantly contributes to the accumulation of TM ECM proteins by upregulating TGFBR2 expression. It establishes a more advantageous foundation for the clinical treatment targeting TGF β 2 in POAG. Future studies can target the degree of TGFBR1 phosphorylation on the cell membrane surface, and explore whether there is an interaction between the two

TGF β isoforms, its influence on phagocytosis of HTM cells, and the specific mechanisms of the two TGF β isoforms.

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The research study was conceived and designed by Tao Guo. Chenyu Xu, Jiahong Wei, and Siyu Zhao conducted the experiments. Chenyu Xu conducted the data analysis with help from Siyu Zhao and Jiahong Wei. Human TM tissues were collected by Dan Song and Mingmin Hou.

Declaration of Competing Interest

No conflicts of interest have been disclosed by the authors.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Conflicts of Interest

None.

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