FGF-dependent midline-derived progenitor cells in hypothalamic infundibulum development

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SUMMARY
The infundibulum links the nervous and endocrine systems, serving as a crucial integrating centre for body homeostasis. Here we describe that the chick infundibulum derives from two subsets of anterior ventral midline cells. One set remains at the ventral midline and forms the posterior-ventral infundibulum. A second set migrates laterally, forming a collar around the midline. We show that collar cells are composed of Fgf3+ SOX3+ proliferating progenitors, the induction of which is SHH dependent, but the maintenance of which requires FGF signalling. Collar cells proliferate late into embryogenesis, can generate neurospheres that passage extensively, and differentiate to distinct fates, including hypothalamic neuronal fates and Fgf10+ anterior-dorsal infundibular cells. Together, our study shows that a subset of anterior floor plate-like cells gives rise to Fgf3+ SOX3+ progenitor cells, demonstrates a dual origin of infundibular cells and reveals a crucial role for FGF signalling in governing extended infundibular growth.

KEY WORDS: FGF, Floor plate, Hypothalamus, Chick

INTRODUCTION
In the adult, homeostasis, i.e. the control of the body’s internal environment, is mediated through the hypothalamo-pituitary neuroaxis. A central feature of this axis is the projection of hypothalamic axons through an evagination of the ventral hypothalamic floor termed the infundibulum (Pelletier, 1991). Despite its key role in body function, little is understood of the cellular and molecular events that orchestrate formation of the infundibulum and that sculpt and maintain it over time.

Much of the ventral hypothalamus arises from anterior ventral midline floor plate-like cells (Manning et al., 2006). As one of the major organisers of the CNS, floor plate (fp) cells instruct neural cells to acquire distinctive fates and establish the elaborate neuronal networks that underlie CNS function (Jessell and Dodd, 1990; Ericson et al., 1997; Colamarino and Tessier-Lavigne, 1995; Placzek and Briscoe, 2005). Numerous lines of evidence suggest that the fp is a non-uniform population, with cells along the anterior-posterior axis displaying distinct characteristics (for a review, see Placzek and Briscoe, 2005). In the forebrain, fp cells are particularly heterogeneous and show dynamic changes in their molecular profiles and behaviour (Kapsimali et al., 2004; Manning et al., 2006; Ohyama et al., 2008). This raises the possibility that subsets of anterior fp contribute to defined ventral forebrain structures, including the infundibulum.

In all vertebrates examined, FGFs are expressed within both fp-derived cells of the ventral hypothalamic midline (Manning et al., 2006) and the forming infundibulum (Tannahill et al., 1992; Ohuchi et al., 2000; Herzog et al., 2004; Theil et al., 2008; Tsai et al., 2011), where they may play multiple roles in the neuroendocrine hypothalamus. FGFs act as spatial and proliferative cues for progenitors within Rathke’s pouch, which is the precursor of the anterior pituitary (Ericson et al., 1998; Norlin et al., 2000; Zhu et al., 2007), and additionally promote diverse aspects of specification of neuroendocrine neurons (Tsai et al., 2011). Similarly, emerging evidence supports a function for FGF signalling in development of the infundibulum itself. In zebrafish, FGF signalling is required for the expression of Lhx2 (Seth et al., 2006), a Lim homeodomain transcription factor that is expressed widely in the ventral hypothalamus and that in mouse is required for appropriate proliferation and formation of the infundibulum. Mouse mutants that lack LHX2 expression show unusually high levels of proliferation in the ventral diencephalic floor, with concomitant failure of infundibular evagination (Zhao et al., 2010). In Fgf10 knockout mice, furthermore, the infundibulum similarly fails to evaginate fully and infundibular cells undergo apoptosis (Ohuchi et al., 2000). These studies suggest a link between local proliferation and sculpted formation of the infundibulum, but an integrated cellular mechanism linking these events remains unclear: LHX2 and Fgf10 are broadly expressed within the infundibulum and ventral diencephalon and could exert their actions on a number of cell types.

Elsewhere in the CNS, and particularly well-described in the posterior neural tube, FGFs play a key role in neural proliferation (Mathis et al., 2001; Diez del Corral et al., 2003; Akai et al., 2005; Cayuso and Marti, 2005), where they govern expression of SOX genes, HMG-box transcription factors that affect neural proliferation and the maintenance of neural stem/progenitor cell renewal (Bylund et al., 2003; Graham et al., 2003; Ellis et al., 2004; Penvy and Placzek 2005; Scott et al., 2010). In the anterior neural tube, the SoxB1 transcription factor, SOX3, is expressed in the hypothalamus, around the forming infundibulum, and has been previously implicated in infundibular formation. In mouse Sox3 conditional knockouts, the infundibulum and adjacent ventral hypothalamus are thinner and show reduced proliferation rates...
(Rizzoti et al., 2004). This raises the possibility that SOX3 might maintain normal proliferation rates in ventral hypothalamic precursors and hence govern infundibular morphogenesis. Human studies support this idea, showing that aberrant dosage of SOX3 leads to infundibular hypoplasia and abnormal posterior pituitary development (Woods et al., 2005; di Iorgi et al., 2009). As yet, no study has analysed whether FGF signalling and SOX3 expression are integrated in governing proliferation around the infundibulum.

Here we analyse formation of the infundibulum in the embryonic chick. We describe a dual origin of infundibular cells from two populations of ventral midline floor plate-like cells that differ markedly in behaviour. One population persists at the ventral midline and forms the posterior-ventral (p/v) infundibulum. A second population gives rise to a collar of cells that express Fgf3 and SOX3 and are capable of extensive proliferation, with some collar cell descendants differentiating to Fgf10+ anterior-dorsal (a/d) infundibular cells over an extended period, and other collar cells being retained at the neck of the infundibulum. SOX3+ collar progenitors require FGF signalling for their maintenance and proliferation. Together, our studies reveal a mechanism to explain the growth and functional characteristics of the infundibulum.

**RESULTS**

**Dual origin of infundibular cells from anterior floor plate**

To address whether anterior fp cells contribute to the infundibulum, we performed fate-mapping studies in chick embryos, tracing cells from st 9 until E7 (Fig. 1A-C), when the infundibulum is structurally distinct (Fig. 1D). Dil-labelled cells were detected throughout the infundibulum, with highest levels in posterior-ventral (p/v) regions (Fig. 1C).

SEM revealed that the infundibulum first becomes apparent at E4.5 (Fig. 1D,i,ii) and that at E7 two morphologically discrete infundibular cells can be detected: elongated cells that extend along and immediately adjacent to the midline in the p/v infundibulum, and rounded cells in the a/d infundibulum (Fig. 1Diii,iv). To investigate the origin of these cells, we refined the fate mapping, targeting small populations of anterior fp at st 9 with Dil/DiO and analysing embryos after increasing time periods (Fig. 1E-P). These analyses revealed a differential behaviour of fp cells that are initially apposed. Fp cells just posterior to the prosencephalic neck (green cells, Fig. 1E,F) remained at the ventral midline (Fig. 1F inset, Fig. 1G-M) and by E7 contributed exclusively to midline cells of the p/v infundibulum (Fig. 1N-P). By contrast, descendants of fp cells that were at the prosencephalic neck at st 9 (red cells, Fig. 1E,F) moved laterally/posteriorly to form a semi-ellipse of cells. These were initially apposed to the ventral midline population (Fig. 1F inset, Fig. 1G) but appeared to become progressively dispersed from it with time (Fig 1H).

To analyse this behaviour in detail, we examined serial sections and performed 3D reconstructions over the period E3.5-4.5. This revealed that, from anterior to posterior, and over time, clusters of Dil-labelled cells become increasingly displaced from the ventral midline by their descendants (Fig. 1l-M and see Movie 1 in the supplemental material). Tracing to E7 revealed that cells from the prosencephalic neck give rise either to clusters of strongly labelled cells at the top of, or immediately adjacent to, the a/d infundibulum (Fig. 1N,O, arrows) or to scattered descendants in the a/d infundibulum and adjacent hypothalamus (Fig. 1N, right-hand panel). We term the region occupied by these strongly labelled cells the ‘collar zone’ (white arrows in schematic, Fig. 1P).
Prosencephalic neck descendants were never observed to contribute to the p/v infundibulum. These studies reveal a dual fp origin for the a/d and p/v infundibulum.

FGF and SOX3 expression in the infundibulum and collar

To begin to analyse the molecular profiles of the fp subpopulations and their descendants, we examined the expression of FGF genes previously reported to be expressed in the embryonic ventral hypothalamus. No FGF expression was detected at st 9 (not shown). However, distinct subpopulations of FGF-expressing fp cells were specified at this point: when isolated and cultured to the equivalent of E2.5 (Fig. 2A,B), the more anterior prosencephalic neck (red, Fig. 2A) population expressed Fgf3 but not Fgf10 (80% Fgf3+; 90% Fgf10–; n=20 each; Fig. 2C, top panels), whereas the more posterior population (green, Fig. 2A) was Fgf3– Fgf10+ (100% Fgf3–; 80% Fgf10+; n=10 each; Fig. 2C, bottom panels).

These characteristics were revealed in vivo at E2.5 and maintained to E7, the latest stage examined. Throughout this period, midline cells expressed Fgf10, whereas Fgf3 was detected in a semi-ellipse of cells increasingly displaced from the midline (Fig. 2D,E,G-I,O,P). Comparison of expression profiles and fate-mapping analyses indicated that fp cells at the prosencephalic neck give rise to Fgf3+ collar zone cells, whereas posterior fp cells give rise to Fgf10+ p/v infundibular cells (Fig. 2D-F, E2.5; Fig. 2H,I, I inset, E4.5; Fig. 2O,P,S, E7).

Between E2.5 and E4.5, Fgf10 expression expanded (compare Fig. 2D with 2H) and by E7 marked the entire infundibulum (Fig. 2M-O). This suggests that, after E2.5, Fgf10+ cells are derived
Fig. 2. Fgf10 and Fgf3/Sox3 expression in the forming infundibulum and collar zone. (A-C) Anterior fp subpopulations (A and P) used in targeted fate mapping (A) were explanted and cultured in vitro (B) for 30 hours (E2.5 equivalent). The anterior (prosencephalic neck)-derived population expresses Fgf3 but not Fgf10, whereas the adjacent population-derived cells express Fgf10 but not Fgf3 (C). (D-W) Analysis of infundibulum and collar zone markers in transverse section (D-I,H-L,O,S,V,W), wholemount (G,M,N) or ventral (T,U) views (section levels at specific stages are shown in X, with planes labelled in accordance with panels). (D-F) At E2.5, prosencephalic neck descendants (Dil, red arrows) express Fgf3 (E,F), whereas posterior fp descendants (DiO, green) express Fgf10 (D,F). (G) At E4.5, a semi-ellipse of Fgf3+ cells lies between the Fgf10 and Shh domains. (H-L) At E4.5-5, posterior fp descendants (green cells in L and in inset) express Fgf10, strongly labelled prosencephalic neck descendants (arrows in L and inset) are located in Fgf3+ Sox3/Sox3+ regions (arrows, I,J). (M-O) Fgf10 marks the infundibulum at E7, its dorsal boundary at the collar zone (arrows, O). (P) Double labelling shows that expression of Fgf3 and of Fgf10 abut. Arrow indicates collar zone. (Q) Double labelling shows that expression of Sox3 and of Fgf10 abut (single-channel view of Sox3 shown in the right-hand panel). Sox3 is expressed in the collar zone (arrows) and ventral hypothalamus. (R) Sox3 is detected only in the collar zone and immediately adjacent cells (arrow). (S) Comparative analysis shows that strongly labelled prosencephalic neck descendants (white arrow) are located in the SOX3+/Fgf3+ collar zone and weakly labelled descendants are in adjacent cells in the Fgf10+ infundibulum. Coloured arrows in S indicate viewing axes. Comparison of O and S shows that Fgf10+ infundibular cells have a dual fp origin. (T) Sox3 in collar zone cells (arrowheads) at E7. (U-W) Co-analysis of Sox3 and TuJ1 in double-labelled wholemount view (U) or serial adjacent sections (V,W). Dotted lines in V and W outline the infundibulum, arrows in V indicate collar zone. TuJ1+ nascent neurons lie dorsal to Sox3+ collar cells. (X) Schematics (anterior to left) showing the expression domains of Fgf3, Sox3 and Fgf10 at E2.5, E4.5 and E7. Light green represents Fgf10+ prosencephalic neck descendants in the a/d infundibulum. D-V, dorsoventral. Scale bars: 50 μm in C-F; 250 μm in G; 60 μm in H-J; 80 μm in K-L; 200 μm in M,N; 100 μm in O-W.

from both subsets of fp populations (compare Fig. 2H with 2Li and Fig. 2O with 2S) and that prosencephalic cell descendants contribute to both Fgf3+ collar zone cells and prospective/definite Fgf10+ a/d infundibular cells. At all times, Fgf10+ cells abutted Fgf3+ cells (Fig. 2D,E,H,I,P).

We next examined the expression of Sox3, addressing whether it is associated with the infundibulum itself or the collar zone. Prior to E4.5, Sox3 is widely expressed in the prospective collar zone and infundibulum (not shown). However, at ~E4.5-5, Sox3 was extinguished from the majority of the forming infundibulum (Fig. 2J,K) and became restricted to the semi-ellipse of cells in the collar zone and to the dorsal-most cells of the a/d infundibulum (Fig. 2L-Q,T). Comparison of Sox3/Sox3 expression with that of Fgf3, Shh, Tuj1 (class III β-tubulin, a marker of early generated neurons in the ventral hypothalamus) and Fgf10 showed that Sox3/Sox3+ cells are in the collar zone (arrows in Fig. 2K,Lii, E5; Fig. 2R,S, E7), bounded dorsally by Shh expression at E4.5 (Fig. 2J) and by the Tuj1+ neuronal component of the hypothalamus at E7 (Fig. 2U-W), and that they merge ventrally into Fgf10+ infundibular cells (Fig. 2Q). Thus, Fgf10 expression defines the infundibulum, whereas Fgf3 and Sox3 largely mark cells in the collar zone and immediately adjacent territories (summarised in Fig. 2X).

Collar cells can contribute to the infundibulum over an extended period

These studies suggest a model in which prosencephalic neck cells give rise to collar zone cells, the descendants of which can populate the a/d infundibulum. However, they do not distinguish this from an alternative model, in which prosencephalic neck cells are a mixed population, some of which differentiate into collar zone cells and others into Fgf10+ a/d infundibular cells. To test whether collar zone cells can differentiate to Fgf10+ cells, we explanted them at E4 and examined their behaviour in isolation. Immediately after dissection, 100% collar zone explants expressed Fgf3 and Sox3 but not Fgf10, whereas prospective p/v infundibulum explants expressed Fgf10 but not Fgf3 or Sox3 (Fig. 3A-C,E-G, not shown; n=8 each). However, Fgf10 expression was robustly upregulated in collar zone explants after 24 hours in culture (Fig. 3D; 9/10 explants were Fgf10+).
To directly test whether collar zone descendants can colonise the a/d infundibulum (Fig. 3H), we grafted collar zone cells from GFP-transgenic chicks into explanted wild-type (wt) host hypothalami at E4.5, positioning grafts close to/within endogenous collar cells (Fig. 3I,J). After 24 hours, GFP+ cells appeared to migrate through the endogenous collar and medioventrally into the infundibulum.
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Differential cell proliferation in infundibular
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Together, these experiments suggest that the extended growth of
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(C) Comparative statistical analyses demonstrate a
significantly higher proportion of mitotic cells in the
collar and immediately adjacent region than in the
distal infundibular regions at E4 and E7. *, P = 0.0305; **, P = 0.0076. Error bars indicate s.e.
(D-F) Isolated explants of E6 collar
region/infundibulum, cultured and pulsed for 1
hour with BrdU and analysed with anti-SOX3, anti-
BrdU and DAPI. SOX3+ cells (outlined) are detected
(D). The overlay (E,F) reveals SOX3+ BrdU+ (red),
SOX3+ BrdU– (yellow), SOX3– BrdU+ (green) and
SOX3– BrdU– (blue) cells. Scale bars: 80 µm in A,B;
70 µm in D-F.

Collar cells proliferate extensively in vitro and can
differentiate to multiple fates
To further test the proliferative capacity of collar versus p/v
infundibular cells, we analysed the ability of each to form
neurospheres (Deleyrolle and Reynolds, 2009) and, for
comparison, anterior spinal cord fp cells and tail bud. Primary
neurospheres could be derived from collar cells and tail bud but not
from the p/v infundibulum or anterior spinal cord fp (Fig. 5A; not
shown). Lineage-tracing studies confirmed the collar cell origin of
neurosphere-producing cells (Fig. 5B). Primary collar cell-derived
neurospheres expressed SOX3, Fgf3 and Pea3, suggesting that they
retained their original undifferentiated collar cell character (Fig.
SC–E, Fig. 6C). Collar cell neurospheres, moreover, expressed
SOX2, Notch1 and Musashi1 (Fig. 5F–I), which are markers
associated with neural stem/progenitor cells, and found in the
ventricular zone of the hypothalamus, including the collar zone (not

Fig. 4. SOX3+ collar cells proliferate late into
embryogenesis. (A,B) Serial adjacent transverse
sections of the infundibulum (showing one half
only; see boxed region in Fig. 1Cii). At E7, PH3+
cells (arrowheads, A) are almost entirely restricted
to SOX3+ collar cells (arrowheads, B) and/or
immediately adjacent cells in a/d infundibulum.

The maintained expression of SOX3 and Fgf3 in the collar zone
suggests that collar zone cells are retained late into embryogenesis;
we therefore asked whether they can contribute progeny to the
infundibulum over an extended period. Heterochronic (E10 GFP+
to E4.5 wt) grafting experiments showed that E10 collar cells
display identical behaviour to those at E4.5: some remained in situ
and maintained expression of SOX3, whereas some migrated into
the infundibulum (Fig. 3Q). Thus, collar cells retain the ability to
populate the infundibulum into late embryogenesis.
Finally, we addressed whether the directed migratory behaviour
is restricted to collar zone cells or whether Fgf10+ p/v infundibular
cells behave similarly. GFP+ Fgf10+ p/v infundibular cells were
subdissected (Fig. 3E), similarly grafted (Fig. 3I) and examined
after 3 days. Such grafts did not invade the SOX3+ collar zone nor
did they migrate beyond it into the infundibulum (Fig. 3M).
Together, these experiments suggest that the extended growth of
the infundibulum relies on a protracted inflow of collar zone-
derived descendants (schematised in Fig. 3R).

Differential cell proliferation in infundibular
formation
The idea that cells from the collar zone contribute to the a/d
infundibulum over a period of days, together with our observations
that relatively weak Di labelling is detected in a/d as compared
with p/v infundibular cells, suggest that collar zone cells, or their
progeny, might undergo extensive proliferation. To test this directly,
we analysed proliferation in the collar region and infundibulum
(Fig. 4A–C). Analysis of phosphohistone H3 (PH3), a marker of
G2/M-phase cells, confirmed that some SOX3+ collar cells
and their immediate neighbours range in the cell cycle in vivo and
proliferate late into embryogenesis. At E4, significantly higher
numbers of PH3+ cells were detected in the collar cell region and
the immediately adjacent a/d infundibulum than in the p/v
infundibulum (Fig. 4C, n = 5 embryos, P < 0.05). By E7, PH3+
cells were confined almost exclusively to SOX3+ collar cells and/or
their immediate neighbours (Fig. 4A–C; 153 PH3+ cells examined in
eight embryos, P < 0.05). Thus, SOX3+ collar cells and their close
neighbours proliferate more extensively than p/v infundibular cells.

To provide further evidence that SOX3+ collar cells are a
proliferating population, we performed BrdU labelling experiments
in vitro. Explants composed of collar and infundibular cells were
dissected from E6–7 embryos, cultured with BrdU and then double
labelled to detect the relative positions of BrdU+ and SOX3+ cells.
BrdU+ cells were always closely associated with SOX3+ collar
cells. A consistent pattern of proliferation was detected: central-
most SOX3+ BrdU+ cells (55% of SOX3+ cells) surrounded by
SOX3+ BrdU– cells (45% of SOX3+ cells), then SOX3– BrdU+
cells (83% of BrdU+ cells) and finally SOX3– BrdU– cells (Fig.
4D–F; n = 5).

Collar cells proliferate extensively in vitro and can
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To further test the proliferative capacity of collar versus p/v
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ventricular zone of the hypothalamus, including the collar zone (not
(Fig. 3K). Explants were fixed after 72 hours to examine the
expression of collar and infundibular markers and confirm this
behaviour. These analyses revealed that some GFP+ SOX3+ collar
zone cells had remained in situ, with cells closest to the
endogenous collar continuing to express SOX3 (Fig. 3L,N,
arrowhead). Additionally, GFP+ cells had migrated through the
endogenous collar zone into the Fgf10+ infundibulum (Fig.
3L,N,O). The stream of GFP+ cells had increased in number relative
to 24 hours previously (compare Fig. 3K with 3L).
Migrating cells emanating from the graft did not express SOX3 but
upregulated Fgf10 (Fig. 3O,P) and did not appear to re-enter the
endogenous SOX3+ collar zone, suggesting that cells differentiating
from collar zone cells remain spatially separate from them. In
addition to the robust flow of cells into the infundibulum, an
occasional GFP+ cell with neuronal morphology extended dorsally
from the graft (not shown). These experiments show that collar
zone cells can differentiate, giving rise to cells that colonise the
infundibulum and that upregulate Fgf10.

The maintained expression of SOX3 and Fgf3 in the collar zone
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Together, these experiments suggest that the extended growth of
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shown). In addition, they expressed TBX2 and Six3 (Fig. 5J, K), which are markers of the ventral diencephalon and hypothalamus, respectively (Kobayashi et al., 2002; Ohyama et al., 2005; Manning et al., 2006; Pontecorvi et al., 2008), suggesting that they maintain hypothalamic regional identity. However, no expression of Fgf10 was detected in undifferentiated primary spheres (Fig. 5L).

To address whether collar neurospheres can self-renew, we passaged them repeatedly. In the presence of FGF2 and EGF, neurospheres could be re-derived for up to five passages (the maximum tested). Analyses of re-derived undifferentiated neurospheres revealed that, similar to primary neurospheres, they retain expression of Fgf3, Pea3 and SOX3, but do not express Fgf10 (Fig. 5M-O; not shown).

To ascertain that, as in vivo, neurospheres can differentiate to an infundibular fate, growth factors were reduced. Single neurospheres differentiated into multiple fates (Fig. 5P-R), including Fgf10+ cells (Fig. 5R). These formed cup-like structures, reminiscent of the architecture of the forming infundibulum. Additional markers suggested that differentiated cells maintained hypothalamic character. TUJ1+ neurons differentiated within SIX3+ areas (Fig. 5S). TBX2 expression was likewise retained in a small number of cells, in keeping with its reduced expression in vivo (Fig. 5T) (Pontecorvi et al., 2008). Finally, pigmented cells sporadically differentiated throughout the cultures, suggestive of the presence of melanin-concentrating hormone cells that are found in vivo in the ventrolateral hypothalamus (Fig. 5U) (Coll et al., 2004). Together, these analyses reveal that collar cells can proliferate extensively ex vivo and can differentiate to multiple fates, including hypothalamic infundibular cells.

**FGF signalling is required to maintain SOX3+ proliferating progenitors**

Given that elsewhere in the CNS, SOX expression is dependent on FGF signalling (Wilson et al., 2000; Streit et al., 2000; Takemoto et al., 2005; Stavridis et al., 2007; Rogers et al., 2008; Ishii et al., 2009; Tucker et al., 2010), we hypothesized that FGF signalling might also regulate collar zone cell proliferation by maintaining SOX3+ progenitors.

Analysis of FGF signalling pathway components revealed that FGFR1, but not FGFR2 or FGFR3, is expressed in the developing collar region and infundibulum over the period E4-7 (Fig. 6A, B; not shown). Additionally, the transcriptional targets Pea3 and Erm, and dual phosphorylated MAPK (p42p44pMAPK, termed pMAPK), a readout of ERK1/2 activation, were expressed throughout this time (Fig. 6C-E; not shown). Pea3 and pMAPK were notably absent from p/v infundibular cells and were restricted to the collar region and immediate a/d infundibulum (Fig. 6C-E).

To examine whether FGF signalling can maintain SOX3+ cells, we cultured explants composed of collar region and immediately adjacent cells from E4-5 embryos alone or with the FGF inhibitor SU5402. SU5402 treatment over 24 hours was effective in reducing FGF signalling, leading to a 65% decrease in the number of...
pMAPK-expressing cells and similarly reduced the extent of Pea3 expression (n=40; not shown). Treatment over 24 hours resulted in a complete loss of SOX3+ cells, without a similar immediate decrease in NKX2.1+ infundibular progenitors (Fig. 6G-L). This indicates that FGF signalling may selectively maintain SOX3+ cells, rather than exerting a generalised effect on all progenitor cells.

Although SU5402 is widely used as an inhibitor of FGF signalling, it does not distinguish whether it is FGF10, FGF3 or both ligands that contribute to SOX3+ cell maintenance. We therefore analysed the effects of FGF10- or FGF3-blocking antibodies by culturing explants alone or in the presence of either or both antibodies. In the absence of FGF10 signalling there was a significant decrease in Pea3 expression and in the number of pMAPK+ and SOX3+ cells (P<0.0001 and P<0.0006, respectively). By contrast, blockade of FGF3 signalling resulted in a less severe decrease in Pea3 expression and in pMAPK+ and SOX3+ cell number (P<0.0035 and P<0.046, respectively). However, exposure of explants to both blocking antibodies together resulted in a substantial reduction or the complete loss of Pea3 expression and in a highly significant decrease in pMAPK+ and SOX3+ cell number (P<0.0001 for both; n=8-10 explants each; Fig. 6M-Y). This suggests that SOX3+ cells might require both FGF3 from the collar region and FGF10 from the forming infundibulum.

Studies in mouse have shown that expression of Fgf3 in the ventral forebrain is governed, at least in part, by SHH (Powles et al., 2004), raising the possibility that collar cells are SHH dependent. To examine this in chick, we dissected st 9 prospective collar cells (Fig. 7A) and cultured them alone or with cyclopamine, an inhibitor of SHH signalling. Cyclopamine treatment reduced the expression of SOX3 and Fgf3 after a short culture period and of Fgf10 after protracted culture (Fig. 7B,C). Thus, as with many other hypothalamic progenitors (Ohyama et al., 2008), collar cell induction appears to depend on early SHH signalling. We next used this assay to establish whether FGF ligands can expand collar cells, rescuing their numbers after a reduction in SHH signalling. Exposure of prospective collar cells to a combination of cyclopamine and FGF10 resulted in a partial rescue of SOX3-expressing cells and Fgf3 expression. Moreover, after an extended period, Fgf10 expression was detected in cells protruding from the main body of the explant (Fig. 7D,E). These experiments support the idea that FGF10 expands collar cells and suggests that FGFs might govern collar cell proliferation.

To test this latter contention directly, we asked whether the loss of SOX3+ cells following a reduction in FGF signalling is accompanied by a decrease in progenitor cell proliferation. Treatment of E4.5 collar region explants with SU5402 not only...
Fig. 7. FGF signalling promotes proliferating collar progenitors. (A-E) St 9 prosencephalic neck cells explanted and cultured in vitro. In control explants (B), collar cells expressing SOX3 and Fgf3 are detected after 48 hours, and an Fgf10+ protrusion is detected after 7 days. With cyclopamine (C), SOX3 and Fgf3 expression is markedly reduced or abolished (inset) and no expression of Fgf10 is detected. Expression of SOX3, Fgf3 and Fgf10 is partially rescued in explants exposed to both cyclopamine and FGF10 (E). (D) Quantitation of SOX3 analyses. Control, 652±40 SOX3+ cells; with cyclopamine, 18±2 SOX3+ cells; with cyclopamine and FGF10, 220±25 SOX3+ cells. Error bars indicate s.e.; ***, P<0.0001. (F-K) Explants of E4 collar/adjacent a/d infundibulum, cultured alone or with SU5402. (F) Treatment with SU5402 reduces PH3-expressing cells by 24 hours and eliminates them by 36 hours. (G-I) In explants exposed to BrdU for 4 days, little or no incorporation of BrdU is detected after SU5402 treatment. Conversely, TH and P27 expression is increased in the absence of FGF signalling (G,H,I,K). (L) Expression of TH in the arcuate nucleus. (M) No change is detected in cCaspase 3 activity after SU5402 treatment. Error bars indicate s.e.; ***, P<0.0001 in F,I,K and P<0.005 in J. (N) Schematic of infundibulum. p/v infundibular cells (green) are induced by Shh/Nodal, and specified by BMP/Wnt signalling; collar zone cells are induced by Shh, maintained by FGF signalling; collar-derived a/d infundibular cells (light red) are specified by an unknown signal. Scale bars: 40 μm in B-E,L; 60 μm in F,H,M; 30 μm in G.
eliminated SOX3 expression (Fig. 6G,H) but led to a significant decrease in cycling cells (Fig. 7F). A 50% reduction in PH3+ cells was observed after 24 hours and a 90% reduction after 36 hours (n=5, P<0.0001). Similarly, when BrdU was administered to control or SU5402-treated explants, significantly fewer BrdU+ cells were found following a reduction in FGF signalling (n=6, P<0.0001; Fig. 7G,I). Reduced proliferation was accompanied by enhanced differentiation: we detected a highly significant increase in p27, a marker of post-mitotic cells (n=7, P<0.001; Fig. 7H,J), and in tyrosine hydroxylase (TH)+ dopaminergic neurons that differentiate in the ventral hypothalamic arcuate nucleus (Fig. 7G,K,L), after reduction of FGF signalling. Exposure to SU5402 did not appear to promote an increase in cell death: no difference was detected in the rate of apoptosis, as measured through activated cleaved (c) Caspase 3 activity (n=5, P=0.96; Fig. 7M), in control versus SU5402-exposed explants. Together, these results suggest that decreased FGF signalling leads to a reduction in collar cell proliferation.

DISCUSSION

The infundibulum plays a pivotal role in vertebrates, linking the nervous and endocrine systems, and its proper development is crucial to homeostasis. Previous studies have suggested that the infundibulum derives from the ventral midline of the hypothalamus and that its development is triggered through early signalling events between the hypothalamic midline and Rathke’s pouch (Pelletier, 1991; Dassen et al., 2001; Hermesz et al., 2003; Rizzoti et al., 2004). Here, we demonstrate that two anterior fp subsets that are initially induced by Nodal and SHH signalling (for a review, see Placzek and Briscoe, 2005) fashion the infundibulum, governing its protracted sculpted evagination. The p/v infundibular cells derive from a set of anterior fp cells that are specified through BMP/Wnt signals to express Fgf10 (Fig. 7N) (Kapsimali et al., 2004; Manning et al., 2006) and that remain in a ventral midline location. By contrast, a/d infundibular cells derive from a second subset of anterior fp cells that migrate laterally and posteriorly to form a collar of cells around the forming p/v infundibulum. SOX3+ collar cells are a proliferative neural progenitor population that, although initially induced by SHH, is dependent on FGF signalling. In addition to proliferation, collar cells can differentiate to multiple fates, including Fgf10+ cells that populate the a/d infundibulum (Fig. 7N). Proliferating collar cells are retained at the junction of the infundibulum and hypothalamus at least until late into embryogenesis. These findings have implications for the development, function and maintenance of the infundibulum.

Dual origin of the infundibulum

Many lines of evidence in our study support a dual fp origin for Fgf10+ infundibular cells. Our fate-mapping studies reveal that one set of anterior fp cells remains at the midline, giving rise to cells that populate the p/v infundibulum, whereas a second adjacent set (‘prosencephalic neck’ cells) gives rise to a collar of cells, from which the a/d infundibulum forms. The two fp populations display markedly different behaviours. Forming p/v infundibular cells do not proliferate extensively, as evidenced by the retention of strong lineage label expression and a lack of active mitosis, and their descendants remain at the ventral midline: little or no cell mixing is observed in double fate-mapping analyses and grafting experiments show that prospective p/v infundibular cells do not contribute to the a/d infundibulum. The final fate of p/v infundibular cells in unclear, but a likely possibility is that they give rise to the posterior pituitary/neurohypophysis, which is the region in the later embryo to which magnocellular hypothalamic axons project.

By contrast, cells of the a/d infundibulum form from a population of cells that undergo extensive migration and proliferation. The behaviour of isolated explants (Fig. 7A,B) suggests that prosencephalic neck cells intrinsically migrate posteriorly/laterally to form collar zone cells. Some cells in the collar zone appear to proliferate little or slowly, as judged by label retention; however, in general, extensive proliferation occurs in the collar zone. Our observations raise the possibility that the collar zone has aspects of a stem cell-like niche, in which slowly dividing cells can give rise to rapidly proliferating progenitors, some of which differentiate to a/d infundibular fates. Neurosphere analyses, explant culture and grafting studies support this interpretation, showing that collar zone descendants can differentiate into multiple fates, including Fgf10+ cells that colonise the a/d infundibulum.

Although we cannot exclude the possibility that there is an additional source of cells that contributes to the a/d infundibulum, our data strongly suggest a model in which cells of the a/d infundibulum derive from collar cells, which in turn originate from prosencephalic neck fp. Our grafting studies show, moreover, that the collar zone is able to contribute cells to the Fgf10+ infundibulum over an extensive period of time, at least until E10. This observation suggests that, in the late embryonic period, collar zone cells that now lie at the interface of the infundibulum and hypothalamus can continue to shape and/or maintain the infundibulum.

FGF signalling governs proliferating SOX3+ collar progenitors

Emerging studies from a number of vertebrates suggest that FGF signalling plays a pivotal role in development of the neuroendocrine hypothalamus and the pituitary gland, and raise the notion that FGFs might govern the development of the infundibulum itself, potentially via effects on proliferation (for a review, see Tsai et al., 2011). Our studies suggest a mechanism for FGF function in infundibular growth, showing that FGF signalling is necessary for the proliferation of collar cells.

Our studies reveal, though, that the collar zone is not a homogeneous population, and we cannot unequivocally establish which cells respond directly to FGF signalling, nor which collar zone cell type gives rise to a/d infundibular cells. However, in the mouse, SOX3 has been shown to play a crucial role in infundibular development (Rizzoti et al., 2004) and our observations support the view that SOX3+ cells play an intimate role in a/d infundibular formation in chick: in cyclopamine-treated explants, the reduction of SOX3 is accompanied by a reduction in Fgf10+ cells; conversely, the rescue of SOX3 is accompanied by the rescue of Fgf10+ cells.

Our studies demonstrate, furthermore, that SOX3+ collar cells are proliferative progenitors. In vivo, SOX3+ cells are maintained late into embryogenesis and are mitotically active, as evidenced by detection of PH3. In vitro, SOX3+ cells can proliferate, as judged by uptake of BrdU, but are not depleted, their numbers remaining relatively constant between E5 and E7. Notably, only a subset of SOX3+ cells appears to undergo rapid division. This, together with the observation from the fate-mapping studies that SOX3+ cells span label-retaining collar zone regions and immediately adjacent label-diluted regions in the dorsal-most a/d infundibulum, suggest differential proliferation in subsets of SOX3+ cells. The existence of distinct subsets of SOX3+ cells could account for the lack of any apparent change in SOX3 expression in the Lhx2-null mouse, in
which inappropriately high levels of proliferation are detected in the ventral diencephalic floor, with concomitant failure of infundibular evagination (Zhao et al., 2010).

How SOX3 exerts its actions and the nature of SOX3+ cells remain unclear. Several members of the SOX family are expressed in neural stem and progenitor cells, where they are thought to play crucial roles in cell proliferation and in the maintenance of the neural stem and progenitor state (Pevny and Placzek, 2005; Scott et al., 2010). SOX family members operate in a context-dependent manner, interacting with partner proteins, including other SOX proteins, to effect their actions. It seems likely that additional SOX proteins might play a role in the collar zone, interacting with SOX3+ cell subsets.

Proliferating SOX3+ collar cells are dependent on FGF signalling. A reduction in FGF signalling results in the loss of SOX3+ cells and in the gradual depletion of proliferative progenitors. The decrease in proliferation does not appear to be accompanied by changes in apoptosis, but instead by an increase in differentiated cells. Conversely, SOX3+ cells can be rescued by FGF10 after cyclopamine treatment. Although we cannot prove that FGF operates directly on SOX3+ cells, FGF signalling is not simply a permissive proliferative signal for all progenitor cells: NKX2.1+ infundibular neural stem and progenitor state (Pevny and Placzek, 2005; Scott et al., 2010). How SOX3 exerts its actions and the nature of SOX3+ cells remain unclear. Several members of the SOX family are expressed in neural stem and progenitor cells, where they are thought to play crucial roles in cell proliferation and in the maintenance of the neural stem and progenitor state (Pevny and Placzek, 2005; Scott et al., 2010). SOX family members operate in a context-dependent manner, interacting with partner proteins, including other SOX proteins, to effect their actions. It seems likely that additional SOX proteins might play a role in the collar zone, interacting with SOX3+ cell subsets.

References


