Reduced expression of Pax6 in lens and cornea of mutant mice leads to failure of chamber angle development and juvenile glaucoma

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Received May 28, 2010; Revised May 28, 2010; Accepted June 7, 2010

Heterozygous mutations in PAX6 are causative for aniridia, a condition that is frequently associated with juvenile glaucoma. Defects in morphogenesis of the iridocorneal angle, such as lack of trabecular meshwork differentiation, absence of Schlemm’s canal and blockage of the angle by iris tissue, have been described as likely causes for glaucoma, and comparable defects have been observed in heterozygous Pax6-deficient mice. Here, we employed Cre/loxP-mediated inactivation of a single Pax6 allele in either the lens/cornea or the distal optic cup to dissect in which tissues both alleles of Pax6 need to be expressed to control the development of the tissues in the iridocorneal angle. Somatic inactivation of one allele of Pax6 exclusively from epithelial cells of lens and cornea resulted in the disruption of trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal development as well as in an adhesion between iris periphery and cornea in juvenile eyes, which resulted in the complete closure of the iridocorneal angle in the adult eye. Structural changes in the iridocorneal angle presumably caused a continuous increase in intraocular pressure leading to degenerative changes in optic nerve axons and to glaucoma. In contrast, the inactivation of a single Pax6 allele in the distal optic cup did not cause obvious changes in iridocorneal angle formation. We conclude that the defects in iridocorneal angle formation are caused by non-autonomous mechanisms due to Pax6 haploinsufficiency in lens or corneal epithelial cells. Pax6 probably controls the expression of signaling molecules in lens cells that regulate the morphogenetic processes during iridocorneal angle formation.

INTRODUCTION

PAX6, a transcription factor that has been highly conserved during evolution, is a key regulator of eye development in both vertebrates and invertebrates (1–4). In humans, heterozygous mutations in PAX6 are causative for aniridia, a condition associated with a variety of ocular developmental anomalies including deficiency or hypoplasia of the iris, corneal opacities, foveal and optic nerve dysplasia and cataract (5–7). More rarely, mutations in PAX6 lead to Peters’ anomaly (8), a condition that is characterized by a central corneal opacity (leukoma), a local absence of the corneal endothelium (to which the lens may adhere to) and iridocorneal adhesions (9). In mice with heterozygous mutations in Pax6, ocular defects are in general more extreme. In most cases, the eyes are less than half of their normal size (microphthalmos), the anterior chamber of the eye is missing, the retina is abnormally folded and the lens is absent or small and has anterior cataracts (10–13). About 50–75% of patients with aniridia develop an increase in intraocular pressure (IOP) in preadolescent or early adult years that commonly leads to optic nerve damage and glaucoma (5–7). IOP is generated via the aqueous humor circulation system (14). Aqueous humor is secreted by the ciliary processes into the posterior chamber of the eye and leaves the eye through the trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal, which are both localized at the iridocorneal angle of the eye.
anterior chamber (15). Studies in heterozygote Pax6-deficient mice, an animal model of aniridia, have identified defects in trabecular meshwork differentiation and the complete absence of Schlemm’s canal (16). Similar structural defects may well account for the increase in IOP and the glaucoma phenotype, which are observed in humans with aniridia.

During the development of the mammalian eye, Pax6 is strongly expressed in those cells that derive from the surface ectoderm or the optic cup (17–20). Both tissues do not directly contribute to the development of the trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal. The trabecular meshwork takes its origin from cranial neural crest cells that migrate to the eye, whereas Schlemm’s canal derives from blood vessels that penetrate the eye at the cornea–scleral junction (9,21). Some researchers demonstrated a weak immunostaining for Pax6 in neural crest-derived cells during the development of the iridocorneal angle (16,22), a finding that was not confirmed by others (23). At present it is not clear, if the changes in morphogenesis of the iridocorneal angle, which were observed in the eyes of heterozygous Pax6-deficient mice, are caused by cell autonomous or non-autonomous mechanisms.

In order to have a tool that allows dissection of the tissue-specific sensitivity to Pax6 haploinsufficiency, we previously employed the Cre/loxP approach to selectively inactivate a single Pax6 allele in either the developing lens and cornea or the distal optic cup (24). Inactivation in lens/cornea resulted in the formation of a smaller lens and eye, whereas iris development was largely unaffected. In contrast, the dosage of Pax6 in the distal optic cup was essential for the development of the iris, but not relevant for that of the lens. In the present study, we used essentially the same system to dissect in which cell types both alleles of Pax6 need to be expressed to control the development of the tissues in the iridocorneal angle. We show that the specific deletion of one Pax6 copy from the lens and cornea leads to structural changes during trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal development, which are very similar to those that are observed in heterozygous Pax6-deficient mice. In contrast, the specific deletion of Pax6 in the distal optic cup does not lead to obvious developmental changes in the trabecular meshwork or Schlemm’s canal. Overall, our findings strongly indicate that the expression of Pax6 in the lens/cornea during embryonic life controls essential signaling processes that are critically required for the generation and the differentiation of the tissues in the iridocorneal angle. Moreover, we demonstrate that failure in the development of the trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal following the exclusive inactivation of a single Pax6 allele in the surface ectoderm derivatives leads to an increase in IOP, to optic nerve damage and to glaucoma.

RESULTS

Anterior chamber development is impaired in the eyes of Pax6\(^{floxed^{-}}\)-Le-Cre mice

Differentiation of the iridocorneal angle in the anterior chamber of the mouse eye occurs during the first 2 weeks of postnatal life (9). Initially, the angle is filled by a dense mass of mesenchymal cells, which start to separate from each other at the beginning of the second postnatal week. During this period, vessels appear in the adjacent sclera. These processes were not obviously different between the eyes of Pax6\(^{floxed^{-}}\);Le-Cre (experimental) mice and their Pax6\(^{floxed^{-}}\) (control) littermates, which both showed mesenchymal cells and adjacent scleral vessels in their iridocorneal angles at postnatal day (P) 9 (Fig. 1A and B). Markedly different between experimental and control animals was the size of the angle, which was considerably more narrow in the eyes of Pax6\(^{floxed^{-}}\);Le-Cre mice (Fig. 1A and B). During the second postnatal week, mesenchymal cells and vessels in the iridocorneal angle differentiate to form the trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal, and the morphogenesis of both structures is complete by the end of the third postnatal week (9). Differentiation of trabecular meshwork and...
Schlemm’s canal did not occur in the eyes of Pax6\(^{\text{flox/+}}\);Le-Cre mice; and at the fourth postnatal week, both structures were only present in the eyes of Pax6\(^{\text{flox/+}}\) or Pax6\(^{+/+}\) littermates (Fig. 1C), or Le-Cre mice, but were essentially absent in experimental littermates (Fig. 1D). Notably, the root of the iris had become attached to the cornea causing a complete closure of the iridocorneal angle in Pax6\(^{\text{flox/+}}\);Le-Cre mice (Fig. 1D). At 3 months of age, the iris root of Pax6\(^{\text{flox/+}}\);Le-Cre mice formed a dense layer of epithelial cells, which attached to and completely covered the periphery of the cornea (Fig. 1F and H), whereas the iridocorneal angle was wide open in the control littermates (Fig. 1E and G). In the region that corresponded to the site where trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal was localized in control littermates (Fig. 2A), spindle-shaped cells that were embedded in a dense extracellular matrix were observed in experimental mice by electron microscopy (Fig. 2B). The spindle-shaped cells were in direct contact with the epithelial cells of the iris, whereas the extracellular fibers that surrounded the spindle-shaped cells were continuous with those of sclera and cornea. The electron microscopical analysis supported the results of the histological analysis confirming the complete absence of the trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal in the eyes of Pax6\(^{\text{flox/+}}\);Le-Cre experimental mice.

Structural abnormalities in the eyes of Pax6\(^{\text{flox/+}}\);Le-Cre mice were not confined to the periphery of the anterior chamber, but were also observed in its center. In newborn mice, the lens had not become separated from the lens stalk during early eye development and remained attached to the cornea throughout the first postnatal days. Consequently, a defect was present in the central corneal stroma, through which the corneal endothelium extended to come into contact with the anterior lens capsule (solid arrow). The corneal endothelium was missing in this area. Beyond the third postnatal week, the lens had usually become separated from the cornea (Fig. 3B). In the center of the cornea, where the lens stalk had persisted and the corneal endothelium had not been formed, the anterior tip of the iris remained attached to the inner side of the cornea (Fig. 3B). Upon higher magnification, iris tissue and lose extracellular matrix were seen to

**Figure 2.** Trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal are absent in 3-month-old Pax6\(^{\text{flox/+}}\);Le-Cre mice. Electron micrographs of trabecular meshwork (TM) and Schlemm’s canal (SC) in a control animal (A) and of the corresponding region in a Pax6\(^{\text{flox/+}}\);Le-Cre mouse (B). (A) In the control eye, the lamellae of the TM and SC show an essentially normal structure. (B) In the region that corresponds to the site where TM and SC are localized in control littersmates, spindle-shaped cells (arrows) that are embedded in a dense extracellular matrix are observed in experimental mice. The spindle-shaped cells are in direct contact with the epithelial cells of the iris (Ir), whereas the extracellular fibers that surround the cells are continuous with those of sclera and cornea.

**Figure 3.** Peters’ anomaly in Pax6\(^{\text{flox/+}}\);Le-Cre mice. (A) At P9, the lens (Le) is attached to the cornea (Co), and a defect is present in the central corneal stroma (open arrow) through which the corneal epithelium extends to come into contact with the anterior lens capsule (solid arrow). The corneal endothelium is missing in this area. (B) At 3 months of age, the lens (Le) is separated from the cornea (Co). In the center of the cornea, the anterior tip of the iris (Ir) is attached to the inner side of the cornea (solid arrow) and the corneal endothelium is missing in this area. At the opposite side of the cornea, there is a small defect in the corneal stroma that is filled with epithelial cells (open arrow). (C) Three-month-old Pax6\(^{\text{flox/+}}\);Le-Cre mouse in which iris tissue and lose extracellular matrix (asterisk) fill a central defect in the corneal stroma. (D) Three-month-old Pax6\(^{\text{flox/+}}\);Le-Cre mouse with a vesicle (asterisk) in the middle of the central corneal stroma, which is surrounded by epithelial cells that show the structural characteristics of corneal epithelial cells.
fill the central defect in the corneal stroma through which the lens stalk had persisted in early postnatal life (Fig. 3C). In some of the eyes, a vesicle was seen in the middle of the central corneal stroma, which was surrounded by epithelial cells that showed structural characteristics of corneal epithelial cells and probably took their origin from cells of the persisting lens stalk (Fig. 3D).

Eyes of 3–4-week-old Pax6^{box/+};α-Cre mice, which were investigated in parallel experiments showed an open iridocorneal angle (Fig. 4A) and no obvious defects in the structure of trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal (Fig. 4B). In contrast, the stroma of the iris was markedly thinner when compared with control littermates corroborating previous findings (24). In a previous work, we had observed lack of trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal development in 2-week-old Pax6^{−/−} mice (16). We now investigated the eyes of 2-month-old Pax6^{−/−} animals and found that the iris root completely covered the peripheral cornea to occlude the iridocorneal angle, a structural defect which was quite similar to that seen in the eyes of Pax6^{box/+};Le-Cre mice (Fig. 4C). Iridocorneal adhesions were also present in the region of the pupil, and the lens was attached to the cornea. Accordingly, an anterior chamber was largely absent.

IOP is elevated in the eyes of Pax6^{box/+};Le-Cre mice

Since the conventional outflow pathways of the aqueous humor, trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal, do not form in Pax6^{box/+};Le-Cre mice, and the chamber angle becomes blocked by the root of the iris, we were interested to find out if the structural impediment of aqueous humor outflow would lead to an increase in IOP. To this end, we measured IOP invasively by anterior chamber cannulation. As both the root and the anterior tip of the iris were attached to the cornea in experimental mice, the cannula was inserted through the midperiphery of the cornea, where a small anterior chamber was present. IOP was measured in the eyes of 72 animals (41 control and 31 experimental littermates) that were 10 weeks of age. In both control and experimental mice, IOP showed a normal distribution (Fig. 5) and was significantly higher (P < 0.0001) in the eyes of experimental mice (26.13 ± 4.62, mean ± SD) when compared with control animals (19.33 ± 1.94; Fig. 5). To further study the change in IOP over time in Pax6^{box/+};Le-Cre mice, we measured IOP non-invasively by tonometry in the eyes of 3–5.5-month-old mice. In marked correlation with the data obtained by invasive measurements, IOP was significantly elevated in Pax6^{box/+};Le-Cre mice when compared with control animals between 3 and 5.5 months of age (Fig. 6). Because of the large structural abnormalities in the anterior eye of Pax6^{−/−} mice, IOP measurements were not performed in this mouse strain.

Optic nerves of Pax6^{box/+};Le-Cre mice show axonal damage

In order to learn if the continuous exposure to elevated IOP for several months is causing glaucomatous damage of optic nerve axons, we investigated the optic nerves of 6-month-old Pax6^{box/+};Le-Cre mice by light and electron microscopy and compared it with those of their control littermates. In the optic nerve semithin sections from Pax6^{box/+};Le-Cre mice, in which myelin sheaths had been stained with 1,4-phenylenediamine (PPD), multiple dark spots were readily observed that were extremely rare in the optic nerves of control animals (Fig. 7A and B). Subsequent electron microscopy of the dark spots visualized degenerating axons that formed dense and irregular whorls of myelin (Fig. 7C...
and D). In addition, axons were arranged less densely in the optic nerves of Pax6\textsuperscript{floxp+/};Le-Cre mice when compared with control animals (Fig. 8A and B). In contrast, light and electron microscopy of optic nerves of 4-week-old Pax6\textsuperscript{floxp+/};Le-Cre mice and control littermates did not show any evidence of degenerating optic nerve axons (Fig. 9C). As a next step, we wanted to support our qualitative observations by obtaining quantitative data. Since lenses and eyes of Pax6\textsuperscript{floxp+/};Le-Cre mice are smaller than that of control littermates (24), we first wanted to know if the size of the optic nerve is smaller in a small eye, independently of any glaucomatous damage. Indeed, the morphometric analysis of the area covered by optic nerves in a cross section showed that the nerves thicken with increasing age both in Pax6\textsuperscript{floxp+/};Le-Cre mice and control littermates, but that the area of Pax6\textsuperscript{floxp+/};Le-Cre optic nerves is ~30–35% smaller than that of controls, irrespective of age (Fig. 9A). We next tested if a smaller size nerve does also contain a smaller number of axons. We therefore counted all axons of the optic nerve in electron micrographs (Fig. 9C) of cross-sectioned nerves from 4-week-old Pax6\textsuperscript{floxp+/};Le-Cre mice and control littermates. We choose 4 weeks of age, as mouse optic nerve axons are already myelinated at this age, and we had not observed degenerating optic nerve axons at this stage neither in Pax6\textsuperscript{floxp+/};Le-Cre nor in control animals. Although 49 354 ± 1440 axons were counted in the optic nerves of control animals, only 25 961 ± 5476 were identified in those of Pax6\textsuperscript{floxp+/};Le-Cre mice (Fig. 9B). We concluded that, compared with control animals, Pax6\textsuperscript{floxp+/};Le-Cre mice are born with smaller optic nerves containing fewer axons and that absolute measurements would not be appropriate to identify glaucomatous optic nerve damage in Pax6\textsuperscript{floxp+/};Le-Cre experimental mice. Alternatively, we rather decided to assess the ratio between the total number of degenerating axons as identified in paraphenylenediamine sections (Fig. 8B) and that of the total number of axons. The results clearly showed that there are significantly (P < 0.05) more degenerating axons per number of total axons in the optic nerves of experimental mice at 6 months of age (Fig. 10) when compared with control littermates, and strongly supported the assumption that the increase in IOP leads to glaucomatous optic nerve damage in Pax6\textsuperscript{floxp+/};Le-Cre animals.

DISCUSSION

We conclude that the expression of Pax6 in the developing lens and/or cornea plays a critical role for the formation of the aqueous humor drainage structures in the iridocorneal angle of the eye. Somatic inactivation of one allele of Pax6 exclusively from the epithelial cells of lens and cornea results in the complete disruption of trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal development as well as in a growing adhesion between iris periphery and cornea in juvenile eyes, which results in a complete closure of the iridocorneal angle in the adult eye. The structural changes in the iridocorneal angle cause a continuous increase in IOP that finally leads to degenerative changes in optic nerve axons and to glaucoma.

The role of Pax6 haploinsufficiency in iridocorneal chamber development is non-cell autonomous

The transcription of Pax6 is regulated by multiple transcriptional control elements (25–28). A genomic region which contains the ectoderm enhancer of the Pax6 promoter drives the expression of Cre in Le-Cre transgenic mice (29). The recombination pattern mediated by the Le-Cre transgenic line has been characterized in previous studies and includes the cells of the lens, the epithelial layer of the cornea and some amacrone cells in the inner nuclear layer of the retina (24).
Schlemm’s canal is a modified blood vessel (30) that derives from the mesoderm, whereas the trabecular meshwork takes its origin from mesenchymal cells of the cranial neural crest (9,23). Since essentially no Cre-mediated recombination has been observed in cells of neural crest or mesodermal origin, we conclude that the defects in iridocorneal angle formation in Pax6\(^{\text{flox+/+};\text{Le-Cre}}\) are caused not by cell autonomous effects but rather by non-autonomous mechanisms due to Pax6 haploinsufficiency in cells outside the iridocorneal angle. The corneal epithelium that covers the outer surface of the cornea and the amacrine cells of the retina are localized distant to the tissues of the iridocorneal angle, and it appears to be unlikely that signaling factors derived from both cell types would have a significant influence on the development of the iridocorneal angle. In contrast, signaling factors secreted from the lens epithelium into the aqueous humor would easily reach the tissues of the iridocorneal angle. It, therefore, seems more likely that the expression of both Pax6 alleles in the lens is required for the formation of the trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal, and the morphogenesis of the iridocorneal angle. In α-Cre mice, the Pax6 distal retina enhancer drives the expression of Cre (31), which leads to the specific deletion of one allele of Pax6 in the distal optic cup in Pax6\(^{\text{flox/−};\alpha-\text{Cre}}\) animals and the formation of a hypoplastic iris (24). Our data show that haploinsufficiency for Pax6 in the distal optic cup does not affect the formation of the trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal and indicate that the distal optic cup and the tissues derived from it, iris and ciliary body, play only a minor role for control of iridocorneal angle morphogenesis.

High IOP and glaucoma in Pax6\(^{\text{flox+/+};\text{Le-Cre}}\) mice

Trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal form the trabecular meshwork outflow pathways of the aqueous humor (15). Aqueous humor is actively secreted into the posterior chamber by cells of the ciliary epithelium and flows through the pupil into the anterior chamber (32). When aqueous humor has passed through the trabecular meshwork outflow pathways, it drains into the episcleral venous system outside the eye. The trabecular meshwork outflow pathways are critical in providing resistance to aqueous humor outflow (14,33). IOP builds up in response to this resistance until it is high enough to allow the flow of aqueous humor across the trabecular meshwork into Schlemm’s canal. It is not surprising that the structural defects in trabecular meshwork outflow pathways and the closure of the iridocorneal angle in Pax6\(^{\text{flox+/+};\text{Le-Cre}}\) mice result in a highly significant and substantial (~25%) increase in IOP. Still, the increase appears to be moderate when compared with that in human patients following acute closure of the iridocorneal angle, a scenario in which IOP may rise by more than 100%. Compensatory mechanisms very likely prevent a higher increase in IOP in Pax6\(^{\text{flox+/+};\text{Le-Cre}}\) mice. Such mechanisms may involve the uveoscleral or unconventional outflow route which is open to aqueous humor at the iridocorneal angle in the region of the anterior insertion of iris/ciliary body (34), since there is no complete endothelial or epithelial layer that covers the anterior surface of iris/ciliary body in the mouse eye (35). According to data by Aihara et al. (36), almost 80% of the aqueous humor leaves the normal mouse eye via the uveoscleral route, indicating that uveoscleral outflow is substantially higher in the mouse eye as in other mammalian species investigated such as humans, monkeys and rabbits (34).

In several prospective, randomized, multicenter clinical studies, IOP has been identified as the most critical risk factor for the development of glaucoma and axonal damage at the optic nerve head (37–42). Similarly, an increase in IOP does also lead to glaucomatous optic nerve damage in several genetically modified mouse strains (43–46). Glaucomatous damage in mouse and man is characterized by the loss of optic nerve axons and retinal ganglion cells, a parameter that was difficult to evaluate in Pax6\(^{\text{flox+/+};\text{Le-Cre}}\) mice. The specific deletion of one allele of Pax6 in lens and cornea results in the formation of eyes which are smaller than that of control animals and which have smaller optic nerves with fewer axons even in young animals, in which glaucomatous damage has not yet occurred. Comparably findings have been reported for the eyes of male heterozygous Sey/+ mice with mutated Pax6 (47). At 6 months of age, optic nerves of Pax6\(^{\text{flox+/+};\text{Le-Cre}}\) mice contain numerous degenerating axons with structural characteristics similar to those described in other mouse models of glaucoma (48). On a relative scale, the number of degenerating axons is significantly higher than in control eyes, strongly indicating...
that the increase in IOP in Pax6<sup>flox/+;</sup>Le-Cre mice causes glaucomatous optic nerve damage.

**Aniridia and glaucoma**

The exact nature of the developmental defects that cause juvenile glaucoma in humans with aniridia is unclear. Grant and Walton (49) performed gonioscopic examinations in aniridic patients with glaucoma versus aniridic patients without glaucoma and found that the stroma of the iris extends forward onto the trabecular meshwork, initially in the form of synechiae-like attachments, followed by a more homogenous sheet, resulting in eventual angle closure. In contrast, the histopathological analysis of the eyes of two children with aniridia and Wilm’s tumor associated with a partial deletion of the short arm of chromosome 11 (50), where PAX6 is located (51,52), provided evidence for abnormal trabecular meshwork differentiation and the complete absence of Schlemm’s canal. Comparable observations were reported in several earlier histopathological case reports in which the genetic type of aniridia had not been determined (53–56).

Apparently two mechanisms, a primary developmental effect in the trabecular meshwork outflow pathways, followed by a secondary closure of the iridocorneal angle appear to cause or to contribute to juvenile glaucoma in aniridia. This hypothesis is strongly supported by our data obtained in Pax6<sup>flox/+;</sup>Le-Cre mice, in which the same two mechanisms, failure of trabecular meshwork and Schlemm’s canal differentiation, as well as the closure of the iridocorneal angle due to an iridocorneal adhesion of the peripheral iris, were observed. In Pax6<sup>flox/+;</sup>Le-Cre mice, the structural changes in the iridocorneal angle lead to optic nerve damage and glaucoma, and may well do so in humans with aniridia. A sequence of events from a primary structural defect in the trabecular meshwork outflow pathways followed by a secondary angle closure may also explain why glaucoma in aniridia is not seen after birth, but develops in juvenile age. Uveoscleral outflow which accounts for 25–57% of total aqueous flow in young healthy subjects 20–30 years of age (57–59) may compensate for a while for the loss of function in the trabecular meshwork outflow pathways. The continuous closure of the iridocorneal angle, however, should lead not only to a complete occlusion of the trabecular meshwork outflow pathways, but also minimize access to the uveoscleral outflow route finally leading to a substantial increase in IOP and to glaucoma. Naturally, the extent of the structural phenotype in the iridocorneal angle is likely to vary more in the heterogeneous genetic background of humans than in the more defined genetic background of the mouse strain used for the present study, a fact that may also explain why a substantial percentage of patients with aniridia do not develop glaucoma. In addition, there is evidence that the specific type of mutation...
in PAX6 has an effect on the severity of the individual phenotype (60).

**Peters’ anomaly in Pax6\(^{\text{flox}+/+}\);Le-Cre mice**

In the eyes of newborn Pax6\(^{\text{flox}+/+}\);Le-Cre mice, we consistently observed adhesions between the cornea and the lens, and the phenotype of Peters’ anomaly corroborating findings from earlier studies in heterozygous Pax6-deficient mice (16,61,62) and Pax6\(^{\text{flox}+/+}\);Le-Cre mice (24). Similar to our previous finding in the eyes of newborn heterozygous Pax6-deficient mice (16), we detected upon closer examination that the epithelial layers of cornea and lens had not become separated and were in contact through a defect in the central corneal stroma. A comparable phenotype has been observed in mice that are deficient in other transcription factors which contribute to the regulatory processes controlling anterior eye development such as Pitx3, Foxe3, Sip1 and Sox11 (63–69). In heterozygote Pax6-deficient mice, there is evidence that the development of the phenotype of Peters’ anomaly is related to a delay in lens placode formation during early eye development (62). We observed in the present study that the lens of young adult Pax6\(^{\text{flox}+/+}\);Le-Cre mice finally becomes separated from the cornea, whereas only relatively minor defects remain in the central corneal stroma. Obviously, adhesions between cornea and lens are not a permanent scenario in Pax6\(^{\text{flox}+/+}\);Le-Cre mice. The separation between lens and cornea is delayed, but both tissues finally disconnect when the development of the anterior eye is complete. Adhesions between cornea and lens and a persisting lens stalk are not commonly seen in patients with aniridia (6,7), although some cases with mutations in PAX6 and Peters’ anomaly have been reported (70).

**Molecular signals from the lens control the development of the iridocorneal angle**

Although Pax6\(^{\text{flox}+/+}\);Le-Cre mice show a selective reduction in Pax6 expression in epithelial cells of the lens and the cornea, as well as in amacrine cells, it appears most likely that it is the reduced amount of Pax6 in lens cells, which is causative for the structural changes in the development of the iridocorneal angle. For example, Pax6 might control the transcription of genes encoding signaling molecules in lens cells that are required to control the sequence of the molecular events that occur during the development of the iridocorneal angle. Such molecules might be secreted from lens cells into the aqueous humor to reach target cells in the iridocorneal angle. In a recent study, Wolf et al. (71) used DNA microarrays to identify genes that are expressed differentially between 1-day-old mouse Pax6 heterozygous and wild-type lenses. Among the genes that were identified as down-regulated in heterozygous Pax6-deficient mice was that encoding for transforming growth factor-β2 (TGF-β2). Additional experiments showed that the locus encoding TGF-β2, which was positively regulated by Pax6, was occupied by Pax6 in lens chromatin. In addition, using **in vitro** assays, at least three Pax6-binding sites were identified in the TGF-β2 promoter region. Overall, the findings strongly indicate that the transcription of TGF-β2 is under the direct control of Pax6. TGF-β2 is a member of a family of dimeric polypeptide growth factors. In the aqueous humor of the normal eye, TGF-β2, which is secreted from the epithelial cells of ciliary body (72) and lens (73–75), is found at relative high concentrations (76–78). The physiological role of TGF-β2 in the aqueous humor appears to be tightly linked with the immunosuppressive environment of the anterior chamber (79,80) and the phenomenon of anterior chamber-associated immune deviation. In addition, there is substantial evidence that TGF-β2 regulates the turnover of extracellular matrix in the trabecular meshwork (81). It is not unlikely that the action of TGF-β2 on extracellular matrix turnover in the trabecular meshwork is required during differentiation of the iridocorneal angle and that reduced amounts of TGF-β2 in the aqueous humor, caused by the reduction of Pax6 in lens cells, result in the failure of iridocorneal angle development both in Pax6\(^{\text{flox}+/+}\);Le-Cre mice and in human patients with aniridia. In support of this hypothesis are recent findings by Iwao et al. (82) who reported that mice which are deficient in heparan sulfate show disruption of TGF-β2 signaling, an effect that correlates with Peters’ anomaly, anterior chamber dysgenesis and developmental glaucoma. An adhesion of the lens to the cornea and the phenotype of Peters’ anomaly has been observed in TGF-β2-deficient mice (83), quite similar to that observed in Pax6\(^{\text{flox}+/+}\);Le-Cre mice. TGF-β2-deficient mice die at birth because of cardiac defects (84), and several days before the development of the iridocorneal angle is complete in the mouse eye (9). Although the available data strongly indicate that TGF-β2 secreted from the lens is the key signaling molecule to control the morphogenetic events during the development of the iridocorneal angle, different mouse lines need to be developed to finally clarify this question, and such experiments are currently underway in our laboratory.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Mouse lines**

Pax6\(^{\text{flox}/}\);Le-Cre, α-Cre and Pax6\(^{-/+}\) mice were established as described (16,31,85). Pax6\(^{\text{flox}+/+}\); Pax6\(^{\text{flox}/+}\);Le-Cre and

**Figure 10.** The ratio of degenerating axons versus the total number of axons is higher in optic nerves of 6-month-old Pax6\(^{\text{flox}+/+}\);Le-Cre mice than in control littermates; n = 4 for controls and n = 5 for experimental. Horizontal lines represent means. The Student’s t-test was used for statistical analysis.
littermate controls (Pax6\textsuperscript{flox/+} or Pax6\textsuperscript{+/-};Le-Cre) were obtained by crossing Pax6\textsuperscript{flox/+} with Le-Cre mice. Pax6\textsuperscript{flox/+}; Pax6\textsuperscript{flox/+};\alpha-Cre and littermate controls (Pax6\textsuperscript{flox/+} or Pax6\textsuperscript{+/-};\alpha-Cre) were obtained by crossing Pax6\textsuperscript{flox/+} with \alpha-Cre mice. The day of birth was referred to as P1. Analyses were conducted on F1 progeny from a mating between ICR and FVB/NJ genetic backgrounds. Pax6\textsuperscript{-/-} mice were kept in an NMRI background.

**Light and electron microscopy**

Eyes were obtained from newborn mice every day between P1 and P14 and from animals at 3 weeks and 1, 3 and 6 months of age. Eyes were enucleated, fixed in Karnovsky’s solution (2.5% glutaraldehyde and 2.5% paraformaldehyde in 0.1 M cacodylate buffer) for 24 h (86). After rinsing in 0.1 M cacodylate buffer, post-fixation was accomplished in a mixture of 1% OsO\textsubscript{4} and 0.8% potassium ferrocyanide in 0.1 M cacodylate buffer for 2 h at 4°C. Eyes were then dehydrated in a graded series of ethanol and embedded in Epon (Serva, Heidelberg, Germany). Semithin sections (1 \mu m) were collected on uncoated glass slides and stained with methylene blue/azure II (87). Ultrathin sections were mounted on uncoated copper grids, stained with uranyl acetate and lead citrate and examined on a Zeiss EM 10 A electron microscope. Myelinated optic nerve axons were visualized by PPD (Roth) staining of Epon-embedded semithin sections (88). In brief, 1% PPD in 98% ethanol was freshly prepared and stored at daylight for 3 days prior to use until the solution had darkened. The solution is stable for 1 week in the dark at 4°C. Optic nerve cross sections were stained for 2–3 min at room temperature and staining was differentiated with changes of 100% ethanol. To count the number of optic nerve axons in 3- and 6-month-old animals, PPD stained cross sections were visualized by bright field microscopy using a \times 100 oil immersion objective for highest resolution. In 1-month-old animals, in which the myelin sheath of optic nerve axons is still thin, electron micrographs of the entire cross-sectioned optic nerve area were mounted and analyzed. Myelinated axons were identified and counted software assisted (AxiocVision software 3.0 Carl Zeiss, Jena, Germany).

**Measurement of IOP**

IOP was measured invasively in the eyes of 10-week-old Pax6\textsuperscript{flox/-};Le-Cre mice (body weight 27–30 g) and wild-type littermates as described previously (89,90). Measurements were performed at the same time of day. The animals were deeply anaesthetized by intramuscular injection of a mixture of ketamine as hydrochloride (100 mg/kg, Parke-Davis, Freiburg, Germany) and xylazine (5 mg/kg, Bayer Leverkusen, Leverkusen, Germany) and placed on a surgical platform. The eye was viewed under a dissecting microscope, and the microneedle (size 30 G) tip was placed inside a drop of PBS on the top of the eye. At this point, the pressure reading was zeroed. The tip of the microneedle was manually inserted into the anterior chamber with the IOP recorded continuously. The IOP values usually reached a plateau after 1 s of higher IOP values due to the needle insertion. If the plateau was constant for 1 min, the eye was given some gentle extra pressure from outside to confirm microneedle patency. This manipulation resulted in some IOP peaks that returned to the prior plateau level. The microneedle was then withdrawn from the anterior chamber; rapid return of the pressure to zero was required for the inclusion of data. The original measurements were calibrated in cmH\textsubscript{2}O. For statistical analysis, a Student’s t-test was performed.

IOP was measured non-invasively in eyes of sedated mice (100 mg/kg ketamine and 10 mg/kg xylazine injected i.p.). Measurements were conducted at the same time of day using the TonoLab tonometer (Tiotot, Helsinki, Finland). Each reading was comprised of six measurements averaged automatically. Highly and moderately variable readings were excluded. An average of five readings was considered as a single result; presented values are the average of 10 eyes per genotype at each time point (same mice at different ages). Statistical analysis was performed by the two-way ANOVA. Comparable data were obtained from additional litters, but were excluded from the study due to an incomplete analysis.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The technical help of Margit Schimmel is greatly appreciated.

Conflict of Interest statement. None declared.

**FUNDING**

This work was supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (FOR 1075, TP5 to E.R.T.), the German-Israeli-Foundation (I-756-187.2/2002 to E.R.T. and R.A.-P.) and the Glaucoma Research Foundation (pilot project grant to R.A.-P.).

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