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Molecular radiosensitization of soft tissue sarcoma by oncolytic virus-mediated MCL1 ablation

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Abstract

Background: Soft tissue sarcoma (STS) is a rare cancer that develops from soft tissues in any part of the body. Despite major advances in the treatment of STS, patients are often refractory to conventional radiotherapy, leading to poor prognosis. Enhancement of sensitivity to radiotherapy would therefore improve the clinical outcome of STS patients. We recently revealed that the tumor-specific, replication-competent oncolytic adenovirus OBP-301 kills human sarcoma cells. In this study, we investigated the radiosensitizing effect of OBP-301 in human STS cells.

Methods: The in vitro antitumor effect of OBP-301 and ionizing radiation in monotherapy or combination therapy was assessed using radiosensitive (RD-ES and SK-ES-1) and radioresistant (HT1080 and NMS-2) STS cell lines. The expression of markers for apoptosis and DNA damage were evaluated in STS cells after treatment. The therapeutic potential of combination therapy was further analyzed using SK-ES-1 and HT1080 cells in subcutaneous xenograft tumor models.

Results: The combination of OBP-301 and ionizing radiation showed a synergistic antitumor effect in all human STS cell lines tested, including those that were radioresistant. OBP-301 was found to enhance irradiation-induced apoptosis and DNA damage via suppression of anti-apoptotic myeloid cell leukemia 1 (MCL1), which was expressed at higher levels in radioresistant cell lines. The combination of OBP-301 and ionizing radiation showed a more profound antitumor effect compared to monotherapy in SK-ES-1 (radiosensitive) and HT1080 (radioresistant) subcutaneous xenograft tumors.

Conclusions: OBP-301 is a promising antitumor reagent to improve the therapeutic potential of radiotherapy by suppressing MCL1 expression in STS.

Background

Soft tissue sarcoma (STS) is a rare cancer that develops from the soft tissues of any part of the body. Sarcoma is the third most common cancer in children, accounting for 15.4% of malignant tumors of childhood, and 13,170 new cases of osteosarcoma and STS are diagnosed in the United States annually [1]. Treatment for STS requires a multidisciplinary approach that involves surgery, radiotherapy, and chemotherapy [2], with the standard approach for localized STS focusing on surgery and radiotherapy. Despite major advances in the treatment of STS however, poor response to radiotherapy is a critical prognostic factor, and radiotherapy-refractory patients often show tumor recurrence, distant metastasis and poor prognosis. Therefore, the enhancement of sensitivity to radiotherapy is a critical aspect of improving the clinical outcome of STS patients.

Radiotherapy is used in STS patients for the local control of residual tumors after surgical resection [3]. However numerous complications, including fractures, fibrosis, edema, and contractures, hamper the efficacy of this approach. In addition, radiotherapy has the potential to cause secondary cancers in irradiated tissues [4]. Therefore, radiosensitizing approaches are required to reduce the dosage of ionizing radiation delivered to STS patients, especially in certain histological subtypes where the response to

radiotherapy is known to be limited [5]. STS can be divided into distinct histological subtypes, namely fibrosarcoma, liposarcoma, leiomyosarcoma, rhabdomyosarcoma, Ewing sarcoma, and synovial sarcoma [6]. Ewing sarcoma is relatively sensitive to radiotherapy compared to other STS tumors, however, the precise mechanism determining sensitivity or resistance to radiotherapy in this disease remains unknown.

As a novel therapeutic strategy for treating malignant tumors, we previously generated a telomerase-specific, replication-competent oncolytic adenovirus, OBP-301 (Telomelysin), in which the human telomerase reverse transcriptase (hTERT) promoter drives the expression of adenoviral E1A and E1B genes [7]. We confirmed the antitumor effect of monotherapy OBP-301 in epithelial and mesenchymal types of malignant tumor cell, including osteosarcoma and STS [7–9], as well as its use in combination with radiation [10] or chemotherapy [11, 12]. A phase 1 clinical study of OBP-301 was conducted in the United States, with the safety of intratumoral injection of OBP-301 demonstrated in patients with a variety of advanced solid tumors, including sarcoma [13]. In combination with chemotherapy, we have shown that OBP-301 adenoviral E1A suppresses the expression of anti-apoptotic myeloid cell leukemia 1 (MCL1) protein, resulting in the enhancement of chemotherapy-induced apoptosis [12]. Furthermore, in combination with radiotherapy, OBP-301 adenoviral E1B inhibits the repair machinery for DNA double strand breaks, enhancing radiation-induced apoptosis [10]. However, whether OBP-301 can enhance the sensitivity to radiotherapy in STS remains unclear.

In the present study, we investigated the radiosensitizing effect of OBP-301 in human STS cell lines. The in vitro efficacy of combined OBP-301 and ionizing radiation was assessed based on cell viability, apoptosis induction, and DNA damage status. In addition, we assessed the in vivo antitumor effect of the combination of OBP-301 and ionizing radiation using subcutaneous xenograft tumor models for two STS cell lines with different baseline radiosensitivities.

Methods

Cell lines

We used four human STS cell lines, RD-ES (Ewing sarcoma), SK-ES-1 (Ewing sarcoma), HT1080 (fibrosarcoma), and NMS-2 (malignant peripheral nerve sheath tumor, MPNST)[14]. RD-ES, SK-ES-1, and HT1080 cells were obtained from the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC, Manassas, VA, USA). NMS-2 cells were kindly provided by Dr. Hiroyuki Kawashima (Niigata University, Niigata, Japan). Cells were not cultured for more than 5 months following resuscitation. The authentification was not performed by the authors. RD-ES and NMS-2 were grown in RPMI-1640 medium; SK-ES-1 cells were grown in McCoy's 5a medium; HT1080 cells were grown in Eagle's Minimum Essential Medium. All media were supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum, 100 U/mL penicillin, and 100 mg/mL streptomycin. The cells were maintained at 37°C in a humidified atmosphere with 5% CO_2.

Recombinant adenovirus

The recombinant telomerase-specific replication-competent adenovirus OBP-301 (Telomelysin), in which the *hTERT* promoter element drives the expression of the adenoviral *E1A* and *E1B* genes linked by an internal ribosome entry site, was previously constructed and characterized [7-9].

Cell viability assay

RD-ES and SK-ES-1 cells were seeded at a density of 3×10^3 cells/well, and HT1080 and NMS-2 cells were seeded at a density of 1×10^3 cells/well on 96-well plates, 24 h before irradiation or OBP-301 infection. In monotherapy, cells were irradiated at dosages of 0, 1, 2, 5, or 10 Gy using an MBR-1520R irradiator (Hitachi Medical Co., Tokyo, Japan). In combination therapy, cells were infected with OBP-301 at multiplicity of infections (MOIs) of 0, 1, 5, 10, or 50 plaque-forming units (PFU)/cell. Twenty-four hours after infection, cells were irradiated at dosages of 0, 1, 2, 5, or 10 Gy. Cell viability was determined on day 4 after irradiation using a Cell Proliferation Kit II (Roche Molecular Biochemicals Indianapolis, IN, USA) according to the manufacturer's protocol. The combined effect of OBP-301 and ionizing radiation was analyzed by calculating the combination index using the CalcuSyn software (BioSoft, Inc., Cambridge, UK). The computation of the combination index was based on the method of Chou [15].

Western blot analysis

SK-ES-1 and HT1080 cells (1×10^5 cells), seeded in a 100-mm dish, were prepared for protein extraction. Cells were treated with OBP-301 at the indicated MOIs for 48 h and/or were irradiated at the indicated dosages 24 h after infection. Cells were transfected with 10 nM MCL1 small interfering RNA (siRNA), or control siRNA (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA, USA) using Lipofectamine RNAiMAX (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) for 48 h and/or irradiated at the indicated dosages. Twenty-four hours after irradiation, whole cell lysates were prepared in a lysis buffer (50 mM Tris-HCl (pH 7.4), 150 mM NaCl, 1% Triton X-100) containing a protease inhibitor cocktail (Complete Mini; Roche Applied Science, Mannheim, Germany). To further assess DNA damage, SK-ES-1 cells (1×10^5 cells), seeded in a 100-mm dish, were infected with OBP-301 (10 MOI) and then irradiated at 1 Gy, 24 h after infection. Cells were harvested 0.5, 1, and 3 h after irradiation, and whole cell lysates were analyzed by Western blot for γH2AX expression.

Proteins were separated on 8–15% sodium dodecyl sulfate polyacrylamide gels and transferred to polyvinylidene difluoride membranes (Hybond-P; GE Health Care, Buckinghamshire, UK). Blots were blocked with Blocking-One (Nacalai Tesque, Kyoto, Japan) at room temperature for 30 min. The primary antibodies used were: mouse anti-Ad5 E1A monoclonal antibody (mAb) (BD Bioscience, Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA); mouse anti-γH2AX mAb (Merck Millipore, Billerica, Massachusetts, USA); rabbit anti-poly (ADP-ribose) polymerase (PARP) polyclonal antibody (pAb), rabbit anti-MCL-1 mAb, and rabbit anti-E2F1 mAb

(Cell Signaling Technology, Danvers, MA, USA); and mouse anti-β-actin mAb (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA). The secondary antibodies used were: horseradish peroxidase-conjugated antibodies against rabbit IgG or mouse IgG (GE Healthcare). Immunoreactive protein bands were visualized using enhanced chemiluminescence (ECL Plus; GE Healthcare).

Immunofluorescence staining

SK-ES-1 cells, seeded on tissue culture chamber slides, were infected with OBP-301 (5 MOI) for 48 h. Cells were irradiated at 1 Gy, and then 30 min, 1 h, or 3 h following irradiation, cells were fixed with chilled 1% paraformaldehyde in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) for 10 min on ice. The slides were subsequently incubated with primary mouse anti-γH2AX mAb (Millipore) for 24 h. After washing three times with PBS, slides were incubated with the secondary FITC-conjugated antibody against mouse IgG (Zymed Laboratories Inc., South San Francisco, CA, USA) for 30 min on ice. The slides were further stained with ProLong® Gold antifade reagent with DAPI (life technologies Co., Carlsbad, CA, USA) and then analyzed under a confocal laser microscope (FV10i; Olympus Co., Tokyo, Japan).

In vivo subcutaneous human STS xenograft tumor models

Animal experimental protocols were approved by the Ethics Review Committee for Animal Experimentation of Okayama University School of Medicine. SK-ES-1 (5×10^6 cells/mouse) and HT1080 (3×10^6 cells/mouse) cells were subcutaneously inoculated into the flanks of 5- to 6-week-old female BALB/c *nu/nu* mice (CLEA Japan, Tokyo, Japan). When tumors reached 5 to 7 mm in diameter, the mice were irradiated at a dosage of 1 Gy/tumor (SK-ES-1) or 3 Gy/tumor (HT1080) every week for one or three cycles starting at day 0. During irradiation, mice were placed in a prone position, using custom-made holders that contain lead collimators to shield the upper half of the animal. OBP-301 at a dose of 1×10^8 PFU/tumor or PBS was injected into the tumors every week for one or three cycles. The perpendicular diameter of each tumor was measured every 3 days, and tumor volume was calculated with the following formula: tumor volume (mm^3) = $a \times b^2 \times 0.5$, where a is the longest diameter, b is the shortest diameter, and 0.5 is a constant to calculate the volume of an ellipsoid. At the end of the experiment, euthanasia was performed by isoflurane inhalation.

Histopathologic analysis

Tumors were fixed in 10% neutralized formalin and embedded in paraffin blocks. Sections were stained with hematoxylin/eosin. Sections were also prepared for immunohistochemical examination using mouse anti-γH2AX mAb (Millipore) and rabbit anti-Ki67 mAb (Abcam, Cambridge, UK). Immunoreactive

signals were visualized using 3,3’-diaminobenzidine (DAB) solution (Nichirei Bioscience, Tokyo, Japan), and nuclei were counterstained with hematoxylin. All sections were analyzed under a light microscopy.

TUNEL staining

Sections were deparaffinized and put into 3% hydrogen peroxide for 10 min at room temperature. After nonspecific binding sites were blocked, the sections were incubated for 60 min at 37°C with terminal deoxynucleotidyltransferase mediated dUTP nick end labeling (TUNEL; Roche Applied Science, Penzberg, Germany) and stained with DAB solution. Finally, all sections were counterstained with hematoxylin. Sections were rinsed with PBS after every step.

Statistical analysis

Data were expressed as mean ± SD. Differences between groups were examined for statistical significance with the Student's *t* test. P values < 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Results

In vitro radiosensitizing effect of OBP-301 in human STS cells

To evaluate the radiosensitizing effect of OBP-301 in STS cells, we first analyzed the baseline sensitivity of four human STS cell lines (RD-ES, SK-ES-1, HT1080, and NMS-2) to ionizing radiation. The viability of RD-ES and SK-ES-1 (Ewing sarcoma) cells when irradiated at 2 Gy was decreased to approximately half that of non-irradiated cells, as measured by XTT assay (Fig. 1a). In contrast, the viability of HT1080 (fibrosarcoma) and NMS-2 (MPNST) was reduced by less than 50% compared to the viability of non-irradiated cells, even up to 10 Gy (Fig. 1a). These results indicate that RD-ES and SK-ES-1 cells are relatively radiosensitive, whereas HT1080 and NMS-2 cells are relatively radioresistant.

We next evaluated the combined effect of OBP-301 and ionizing radiation on viability. All four STS cell lines were irradiated 24 h after OBP-301 infection, and cell viability was assessed on day 4 after irradiation. The combination of OBP-301 and ionizing radiation decreased the viability of all STS cell lines more efficiently than single treatment (Fig. 1b). Calculation of the combination index indicated a synergistic antitumor effect of combination therapy in all STS cell lines, although in radioresistant NMS-2 cells there was an antagonistic effect found with low doses of ionizing radiation and OBP-301 (Fig. 1c). These results suggest that OBP-301 may act as a potent radiosensitizer in human STS cells.

Suppression of anti-apoptotic MCL1 is critical for enhancing ionizing radiation-induced apoptosis by OBP-301

To investigate the underlying molecular mechanism in the OBP-301-mediated enhancement of radiotherapy, we analyzed the level of anti-apoptotic MCL1 expression in all STS cells. Interestingly, radioresistant HT1080 and NMS-2 cells exhibited high expression of MCL1 protein, whereas radiosensitive RD-ES and SK-ES-1 cells showed low expression of MCL1 protein (Fig. 2a). These results suggest that the expression of MCL1 is associated with the radiosensitivity of STS cells.

We recently reported that OBP-301 enhances the cytotoxic effect of chemotherapeutic agents in human osteosarcoma cells by suppressing MCL1 expression through the activation of a transcription factor E2F1-microRNA pathway, resulting in the induction of apoptosis [12]. Therefore, we next assessed whether OBP-301 enhances ionizing radiation-induced apoptosis by suppressing MCL1 expression in radiosensitive SK-ES-1 and radioresistant HT1080 cells. OBP-301 infection at high doses increased the expression of adenoviral E1A and E2F1, whereas MCL1 expression was decreased in SK-ES-1 and HT1080 cells (Fig. 2b). The combination of OBP-301 and ionizing radiation induced apoptosis (PARP cleavage) in SK-ES-1 and HT1080 cells, which was associated with the upregulation of E2F1 and downregulation of MCL1 (Fig. 2c). To further confirm the role of MCL1 suppression in radiation-induced apoptosis, we assessed the effect of MCL1 knockdown by RNA interference. MCL1 siRNA suppressed MCL1 expression and resulted in the enhancement of ionizing radiation-induced apoptosis in SK-ES-1 and HT1080 cells compared to control siRNA (Fig. 2d). These results suggest that OBP-301 enhances ionizing radiation-mediated apoptosis induction via MCL1 suppression.

Enhancement of ionizing radiation-induced DNA damage by OBP-301

Exposure of cells to ionizing radiation leads to a number of types of DNA damage, including DNA double-stranded breaks, which can be detected by the accumulation of γH2AX protein [16]. We previously reported that OBP-301 infection enhances ionizing radiation-induced DNA damage through adenoviral E1B-mediated degradation of the Mre11, Rad50, and NBS1 (MRN) complex and suppression of DNA damage repair [10]. Therefore, we next investigated whether OBP-301 infection enhances ionizing radiation-induced accumulation of DNA damage by evaluating the expression of γH2AX in SK-ES-1 cells. Ionizing radiation, when combined with OBP-301 infection, increased γH2AX expression in SK-ES-1 cells 30 min after treatment. At 1 and 3 h after irradiation, the level of γH2AX expression remained elevated in OBP-301-infected cells. In contrast, in non-infected cells, ionizing radiation increased γH2AX expression at 1 h, but the level gradually decreased following the repair of DNA damage (Fig. 3a). To further evaluate the amount of DNA damage, we analyzed immunofluorescence staining of γH2AX using SK-ES-1 cells. There was no significant difference in the number of nuclear γH2AX foci between OBP-301-infected and non-infected cells at 30 min and 1 h following irradiation. However, at 3 h after irradiation, the number of nuclear γH2AX foci was significantly lower in non-infected cells compared to OBP-301-infected cells (Fig. 3b and c). These results suggest that OBP-301 enhances the accumulation of ionizing radiation-induced DNA damage.

Effect of combination therapy in subcutaneous STS tumor tissues

To confirm the radiosensitizing effect of OBP-301 in tumor tissues, we assessed the level of Ki67-positive (proliferation marker), TUNEL-positive (apoptosis marker), and γH2AX-positive staining (DNA damage marker) in subcutaneous xenograft tumors grown from radiosensitive SK-ES-1 and radioresistant HT1080 cells (Figs. 4 and 5). Tumor-bearing mice were irradiated at 1 Gy (SK-ES-1) or 3 Gy (HT1080) after treatment with an intratumoral injection of OBP-301 (1×10^8 PFU/tumor). Subsequent immunohistochemical analysis demonstrated that the combination of OBP-301 and ionizing radiation significantly decreased the percentage of Ki67-positive proliferating cells compared to mock or single treatment in SK-ES-1 tumor tissues (Fig. 4b and c). The number of TUNEL-positive cells was significantly increased in combination therapy-treated SK-ES-1 tumors compared with mock or monotherapy-treated tumors (Fig. 4c). Moreover, combination therapy significantly increased the number of γH2AX-positive cells within SK-ES-1 tumor tissues (Fig. 4c). Immunohistochemical analysis for radioresistant HT1080 tumors demonstrated similar findings, in that the percentage of Ki-67-positive cells was significantly decreased, and the number of TUNEL-positive and γH2AX-positive cells was significantly increased, in combination therapy-treated tumor tissues (Fig. 5). These results suggest that the biological interaction between OBP-301 and ionizing radiation is induced in in vivo tumor tissues as well as in vitro.

Combination of OBP-301 and ionizing radiation inhibits the in vivo growth of STS tumors with different radiosensitivities

To assess the in vivo therapeutic efficacy of OBP-301 in combination with ionizing radiation, we again used the subcutaneous xenograft models for radiosensitive SK-ES-1 (Fig. 6a) and radioresistant HT1080 cells (Fig. 6b). Radiosensitive SK-ES-1 tumors were injected with OBP-301 (1×10^8 PFU/tumor) or PBS, and subsequently irradiated at 1 Gy every week for three cycles, with tumor growth observed for 28 days after the first treatment. The combination of OBP-301 and ionizing radiation showed a more profound antitumor effect in radiosensitive SK-ES-1 tumors compared with OBP-301 or ionizing radiation alone (Fig. 6a). There was no significant difference in the mean body weight of mice between the treatment groups (Additional file 1a). Radioresistant HT1080 tumors were injected with OBP-301 (1×10^8 PFU/tumor) or PBS, and subsequently irradiated at 3 Gy every week for three cycles. Consistent with the findings from radiosensitive SK-ES-1 tumors, the combination of OBP-301 and ionizing radiation resulted in significant suppression of tumor growth compared with monotherapy (Fig. 6b). There was again no significant difference in the mean body weight of mice between the treatment groups (Additional file 1b). These results suggest that combination therapy with OBP-301 and ionizing radiation efficiently inhibits the growth of STS tumors in vivo.

Discussion

The multidisciplinary approach to STS treatment involves surgery, radiotherapy, and chemotherapy. Although surgical resection and radiotherapy are the most frequent option for STS, resistance to radiotherapy contributes to tumor recurrence, metastasis, and poor prognosis. Therefore, the enhancement of radiosensitivity is a critical aspect of improving clinical outcomes for STS patients, including minimizing the risk of secondary cancer by reducing the required dose of ionizing radiation. In

this study, we demonstrated that combination therapy with OBP-301 and ionizing radiation has a synergistic antitumor effect in both radiosensitive and radioresistant STS cells. The profound antitumor effect of combination therapy was mainly due to OBP-301-mediated enhancement of ionizing radiation-induced apoptosis and DNA damage, via suppression of anti-apoptotic MCL1 expression. Thus, the combination of OBP-301 and ionizing radiation appears to be a promising antitumor strategy for improving the efficacy of radiotherapy in STS patients.

Although sensitivity to radiotherapy varies between the histological subtypes of STS, the underlying mechanism has not been clearly understood. An anti-apoptotic member of the BCL2 family, MCL1 is frequently overexpressed in various types of malignant tumor, including sarcoma [17]. Our results demonstrated that radioresistant STS cells (HT1080 and NMS-2) have higher expression of MCL1 compared to radiosensitive STS cells (RD-ES and SK-ES-1), and suggested a role for MCL1 in the radiosensitivity of STS. We further confirmed that MCL1 suppression by siRNA or OBP-301 enhanced ionizing radiation-induced apoptosis in STS cells. Several reports have suggested that MCL1 suppression with siRNA or small molecule inhibitors enhances sensitivity to ionizing radiation in human cancer cells, including melanoma [18], non-small cell lung cancer [19], and pancreatic cancer [20]. Similarly, it has been shown that MCL1 suppression with siRNA or antisense oligonucleotides enhances chemotherapy-induced apoptosis in human STS cells [21]. Thus, anti-apoptotic MCL1 may be a promising therapeutic target for improving sensitivity to both radiotherapy and chemotherapy in STS.

Previous reports have suggested that oncolytic adenoviruses suppress MCL1 expression in infected cells [22, 23], and the mechanism has been linked to adenoviral E1A accumulation [24]. Adenoviral E1A accumulation induces the activation of transcription factor E2F1 [25], which can contribute to MCL1 suppression [26, 27]. These findings suggest that E1A-mediated E2F1 activation is critical for the downregulation of MCL1 expression by oncolytic adenovirus. Recently, we revealed that OBP-301 suppresses MCL1 expression in human osteosarcoma cells through E2F1-mediated upregulation of the MCL1-targeting non-coding microRNA miR-29 [12]. Recent reports have further suggested a role for miR-29 in improving the radiosensitivity of human cancers, including nasopharyngeal cancer [28] and lung cancer [29], via suppression of MCL1 expression. Ionizing radiation itself also suppresses MCL1 expression, by inducing miR-193a expression, resulting in the induction of apoptosis [30]. Therefore, the activation of an MCL1-targeting miRNA signaling pathway may be implicated in the combination therapy-mediated MCL1 suppression that we have observed in the present study.

The expression level of γH2AX (H2AX phosphorylated at Ser139), is a strong biomarker of double-stranded DNA damage caused by ionizing radiation [16]. After its initial induction in irradiated tumor cells, the expression of γH2AX is gradually reduced by the activation of DNA damage repair [31]. In the present study, OBP-301 significantly enhanced the level of γH2AX in irradiated tumor cells both in vitro and in vivo, suggesting that OBP-301 has the potential to enhance ionizing radiation-induced DNA damage and thus the sensitivity to ionizing radiation. We previously reported that OBP-301 inhibits the DNA damage repair pathway via adenoviral E1B-dependent degradation of the MRN complex, which consists of Mre11, Rad50, and NBS1 proteins [10]. Indeed, an accumulation of recent evidence has suggested that oncolytic

adenovirus inhibits DNA damage repair pathways via direct interaction between adenoviral proteins and DNA damage response-related factors [32]. On the other hand, previous work has demonstrated that MCL1 is associated with γH2AX and NBS1 following chemotherapy-induced DNA damage in mouse embryo fibroblasts [33]. Finally, Mattoo and colleagues have shown that knockdown of MCL1 by siRNA in human cancer cells, including osteosarcoma, increases γH2AX levels after irradiation via impairment of the homologous recombination pathway [34]. Thus, adenoviral protein accumulation and MCL1 reduction may be cooperatively involved in the OBP-301-mediated inhibition of DNA damage repair.

In various types of cancer, resistance to radiotherapy is thought to be associated with the existence of cancer stem-like cells [35]. The dormancy of such cells is a critical factor for the radioresistance of tumors, because radiotherapy targets proliferating cancer cells by inducing DNA damage-related cell cycle arrest. Recent reports have suggested that a CD133-positive subpopulation of radioresistant HT1080 cells exhibit cancer stem-like characteristics [36, 37], such as activation of stemness-related markers, sphere-forming capacity, tumorigenicity, and resistance to chemotherapy [37]. CD133-positive subpopulations have similarly been associated with the radioresistance of brain tumors [38], liver cancer [39], and gastric cancer [40]. We recently demonstrated that OBP-301 efficiently kills radioresistant CD133-positive cells, as well as radiosensitive CD133-negative cells, in human gastric cancer [40]. In that study, the dormancy of CD133-positive cancer stem-like cells, enriched by sphere formation, was inhibited by OBP-301 but not ionizing radiation. Suppression of CD133-positive cell dormancy was mainly due to OBP-301-mediated cell cycle activation, from G1 to S/G2/M phases. Thus, combination therapy with OBP-301 and ionizing radiation may be a suitable strategy for overcoming the radioresistance of dormant sarcoma stem-like cells.

Conclusions

We have demonstrated that combination therapy with OBP-301 and ionizing radiation exerts a synergistic antitumor effect in STS cells. OBP-301 promoted ionizing radiation-induced apoptosis through suppression of anti-apoptotic MCL1 expression and enhancement of DNA damage. Furthermore, combination therapy showed a more profound antitumor effect compared to monotherapy in radiosensitive and radioresistant STS xenograft tumors. Thus, combination therapy with OBP-301 and ionizing radiation offers a promising antitumor strategy to improve the clinical outcome of radiotherapy-treated STS patients. Further clinical studies are warranted to investigate the tolerability and efficacy of this combination therapy for the treatment of STS patients.

Abbreviations

STS: soft tissue sarcoma; MCL1: myeloid cell leukemia 1; hTERT: human telomerase reverse transcriptase; BCL2: B-cell lymphoma 2; MPNST: malignant peripheral nerve sheath tumor; MOI: multiplicity of infection; PFU: plaque-forming unit; siRNA: small interfering RNA; mAb: monoclonal antibody; pAb: polyclonal antibody; PARP: poly (ADP-ribose) polymerase; PBS: phosphate-buffered saline;

DAB: 3,3’-diaminobenzidine; TUNEL: terminal deoxynucleotidyltransferase mediated dUTP nick end labeling.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The animal care and experimental procedures were conducted in accordance with the regulations of the Animal Care and Use Committee of Okayama University.

Consent for publication

Not applicable

Availability of data and materials

Not applicable

Competing interests

Y. Urata is President & CEO of Oncolys BioPharma, Inc., the manufacturer of OBP-301 (Telomelysin); H.Tazawa and Tos. Fujiwara are consultants of Oncolys BioPharma, Inc; The other authors disclosed no potential conflicts of interest.

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Authors’ contributions

HT, TOz, and TosF contributed to the conception and design of the work; TOm, HT, YY, and SO contributed to the development of methodology; TOm, YY, JH, KS, TKo, TomF, and AY contributed to the acquisition of data; TOm, HT, YY, and SO contributed the analysis and interpretation of data; TOm, HT, and TosF

contributed to the writing, review, and/or revision of the manuscript; YU contributed to the administrative, technical and material support; HT, TKu, SK, TOz, and TosF contributed to the study supervision. All authors have read and approved the manuscript.

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Figures

Figure 1

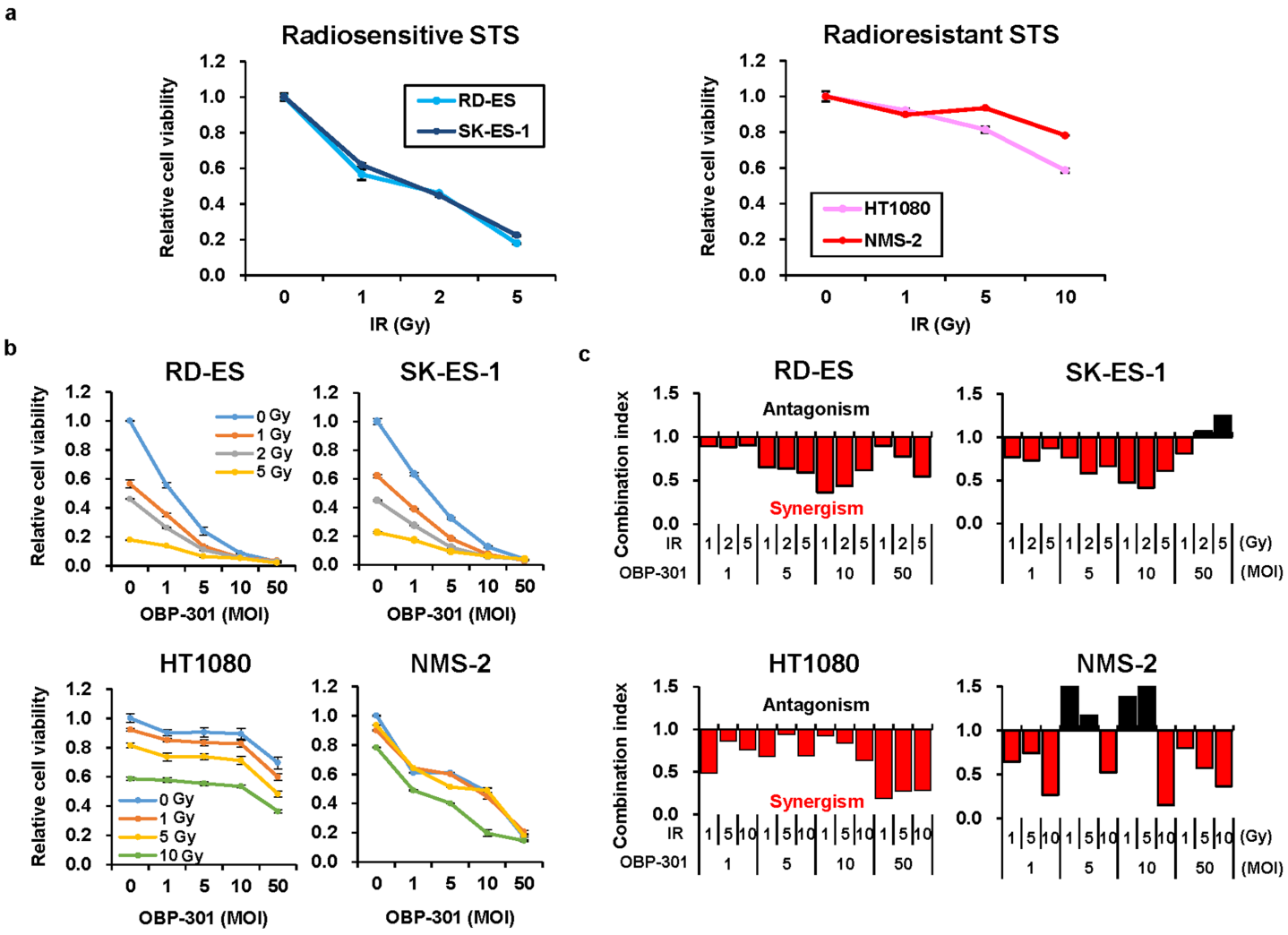

Figure 1

In vitro radiosensitizing effect of OBP-301 on human soft tissue sarcoma cells. a. Four human soft tissue sarcoma (STS) cell lines (RD-ES, SK-ES-1, HT1080, NMS-2) were irradiated at the indicated dose, and cell viability was assessed 4 days after irradiation using the XTT assay. RD-ES and SK-ES-1 cells are relatively radiosensitive, whereas HT1080 and NMS-2 cells are relatively radioresistant. Data are expressed as mean ± SD (n = 5). b. Cells were irradiated at the indicated doses 24 h after infection with OBP-301 at the

indicated MOIs, and cell viability was assessed 4 days after irradiation. c. The combination index was calculated using CalcuSyn software. Synergism and antagonism were defined as interaction indices of < 1 and > 1, respectively.

Figure 2

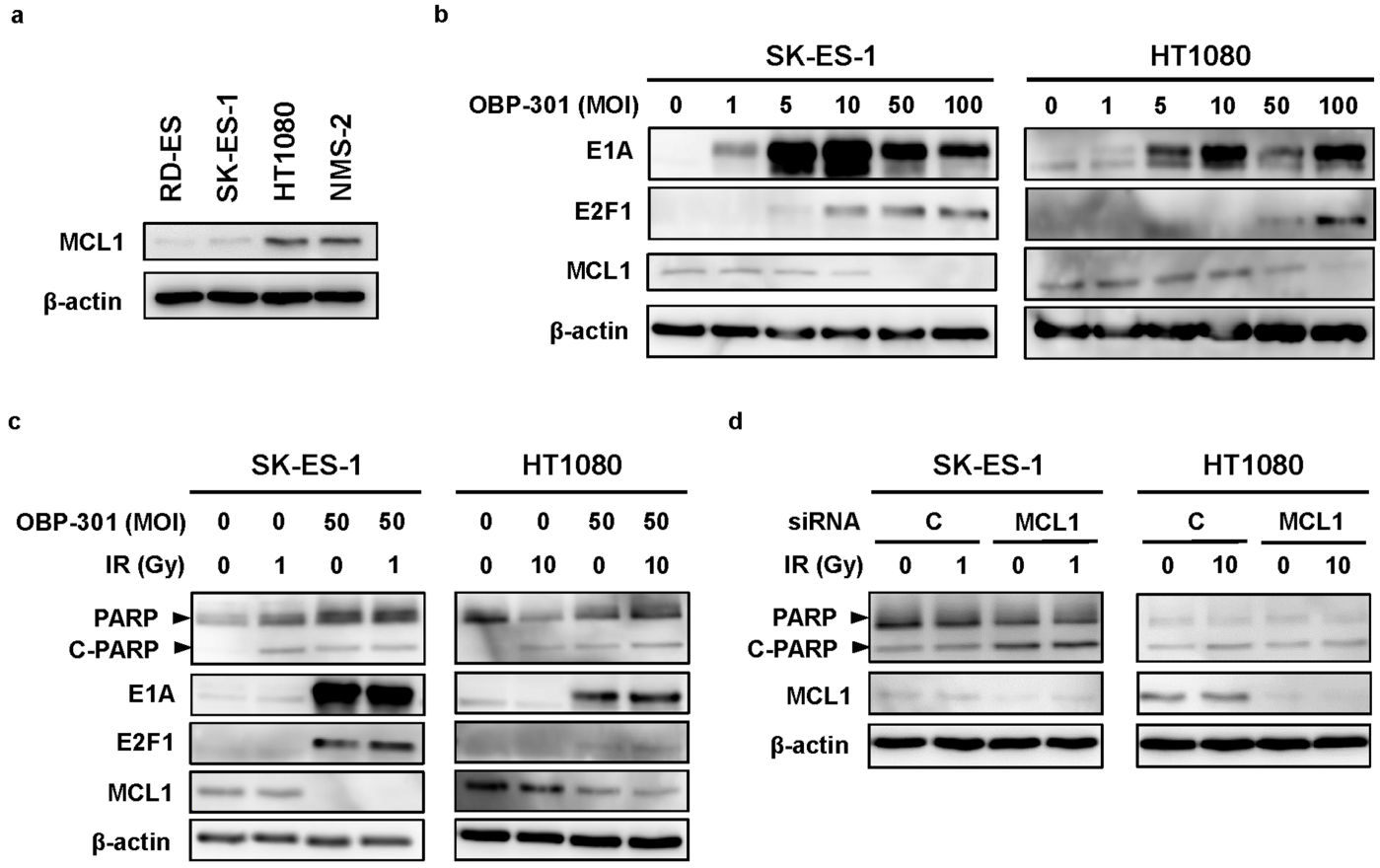

Figure 2

MCL1 suppression is involved in the OBP-301-mediated enhancement of apoptosis induced by ionizing radiation. a. Cell lysates were analyzed by Western blot for MCL1 expression. b. SK-ES-1 and HT1080 cells were infected with OBP-301 at the indicated MOIs for 72 h, and cell lysates were analyzed by Western blot for E1A, E2F1, and MCL1. c. SK-ES-1 and HT1080 cells were treated with OBP-301 and then irradiated (IR) at the indicated doses 24 h after infection, and cell lysates were subjected to Western blot for PARP, cleaved PARP (C-PARP), E1A, E2F1, and MCL1. d. SK-ES-1 and HT1080 cells were transfected with 10 nM MCL1 siRNA or control siRNA for 48 h, and subsequently irradiated at the indicated doses. Cell lysates were analyzed by Western blot for PARP, C-PARP, and MCL1. β-actin was assayed as a loading control.

Figure 3

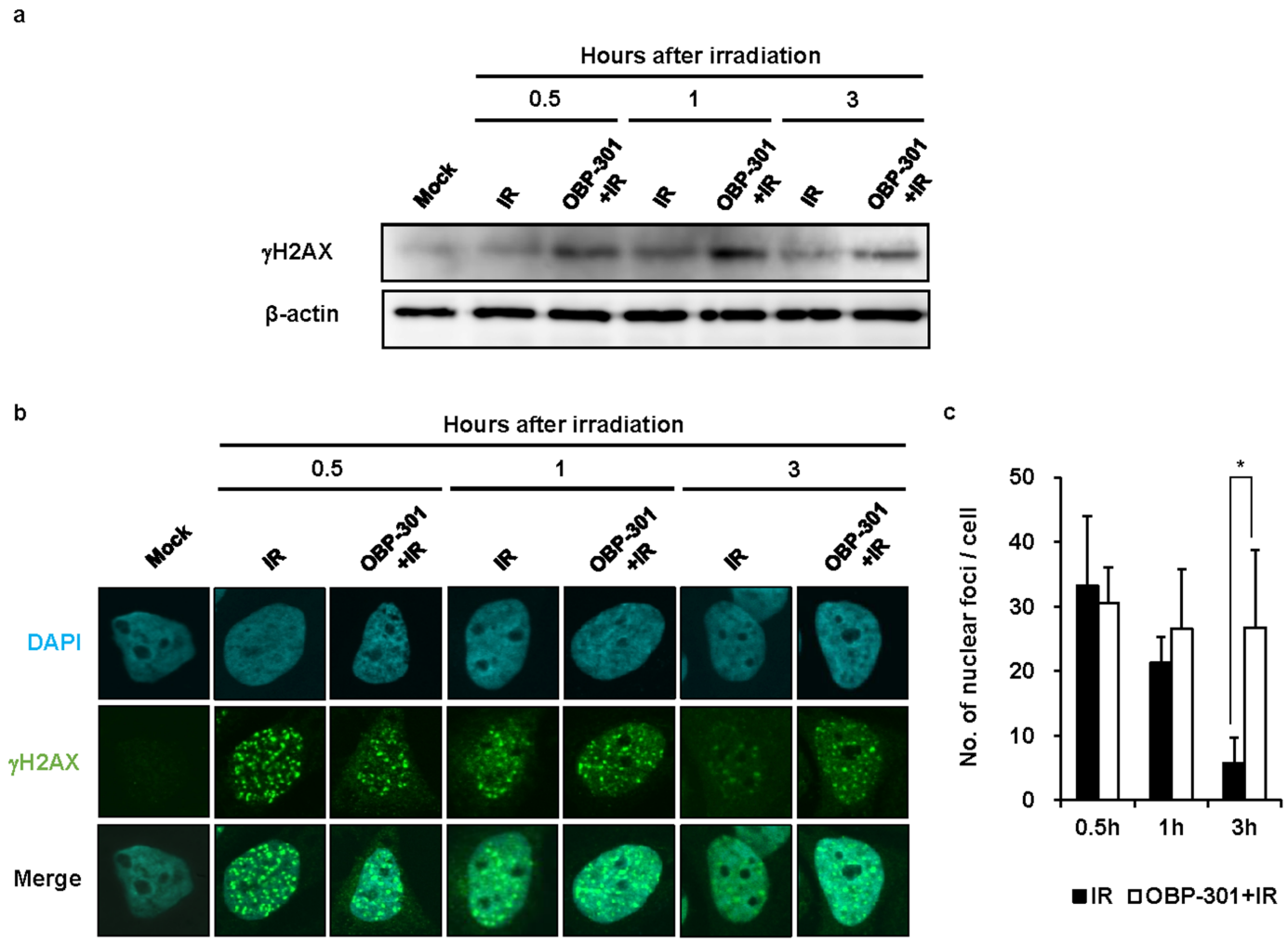

Figure 3

Enhancement of ionizing radiation-induced DNA damage by OBP-301. a. SK-ES-1 cells were infected with OBP-301 (10 MOI) and then irradiated at 1 Gy, 24 h after infection. Cells were harvested 0.5, 1, and 3 h after irradiation and analyzed by Western blot for γH2AX expression. b. SK-ES-1 cells were infected with OBP-301 (5 MOI) and then irradiated at 1 Gy, 24 h after infection. Cells were stained for γH2AX at 0.5, 1, and 3 h after irradiation and analyzed by confocal laser microscopy. c. The average number of γH2AX foci per cell. Data are expressed as mean ± SD (n = 5; *, $P < 0.05$).

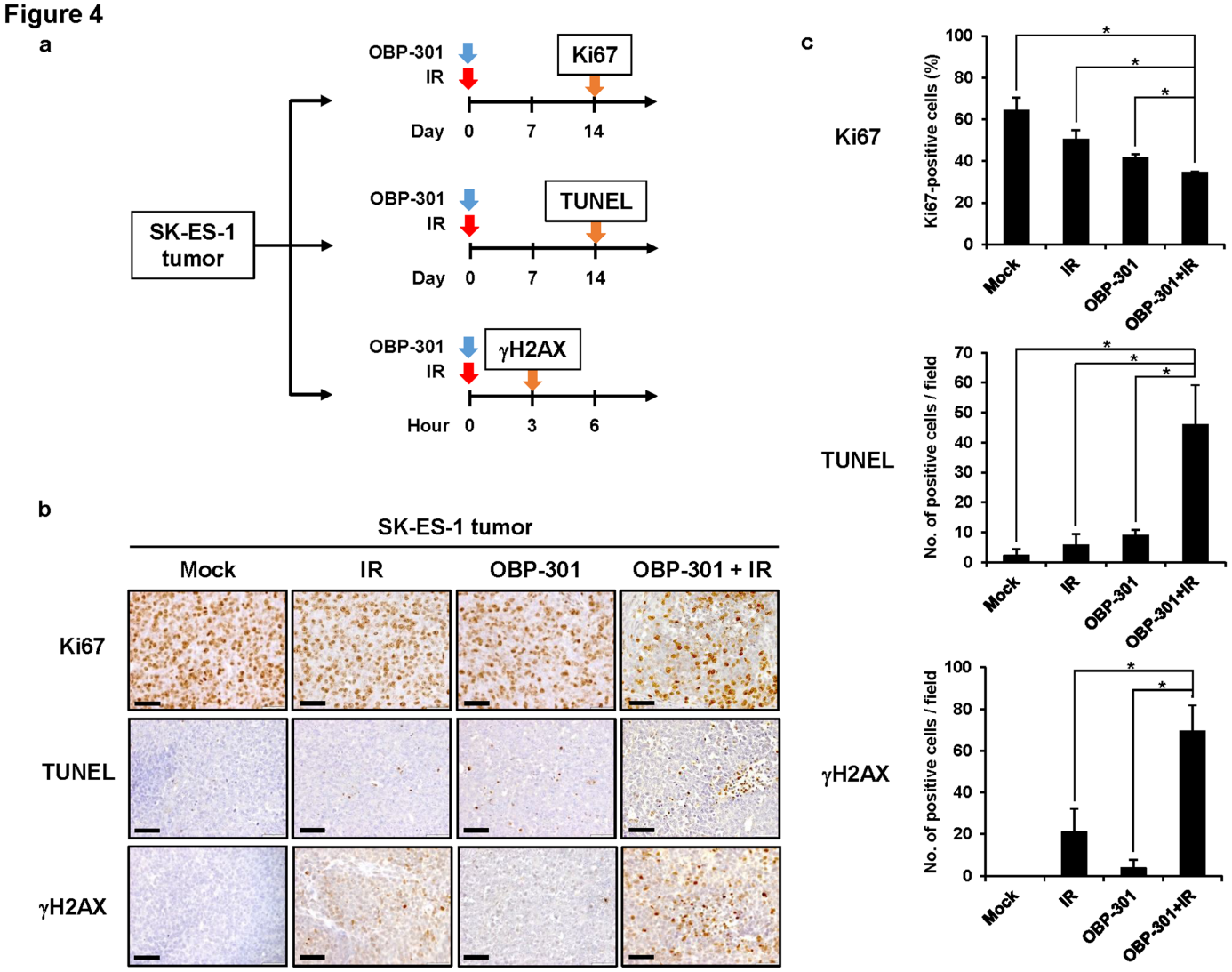

Figure 4

Suppression of proliferation and induction of apoptosis and DNA damage in subcutaneous SK-ES-1 xenograft tumors treated with OBP-301 and ionizing radiation. a. Scheme of treatment protocol used in conjunction with Ki67, TUNEL, and γH2AX assays. SK-ES-1 cells (5 × 106 cells/mouse) were subcutaneously inoculated into the right flanks of mice. Tumor-bearing mice were irradiated at 1 Gy after treatment with an intratumoral injection of OBP-301 (1 × 108 PFU/tumor). b. SK-ES-1 subcutaneous tumor sections were immunostained for Ki67, TUNEL, and γH2AX. Scale bar, 50 μm. c. The number of positive cells for Ki67, TUNEL, and γH2AX staining. Data are expressed as mean ± SD (n = 3 or 4 in each group; *, P < 0.05).

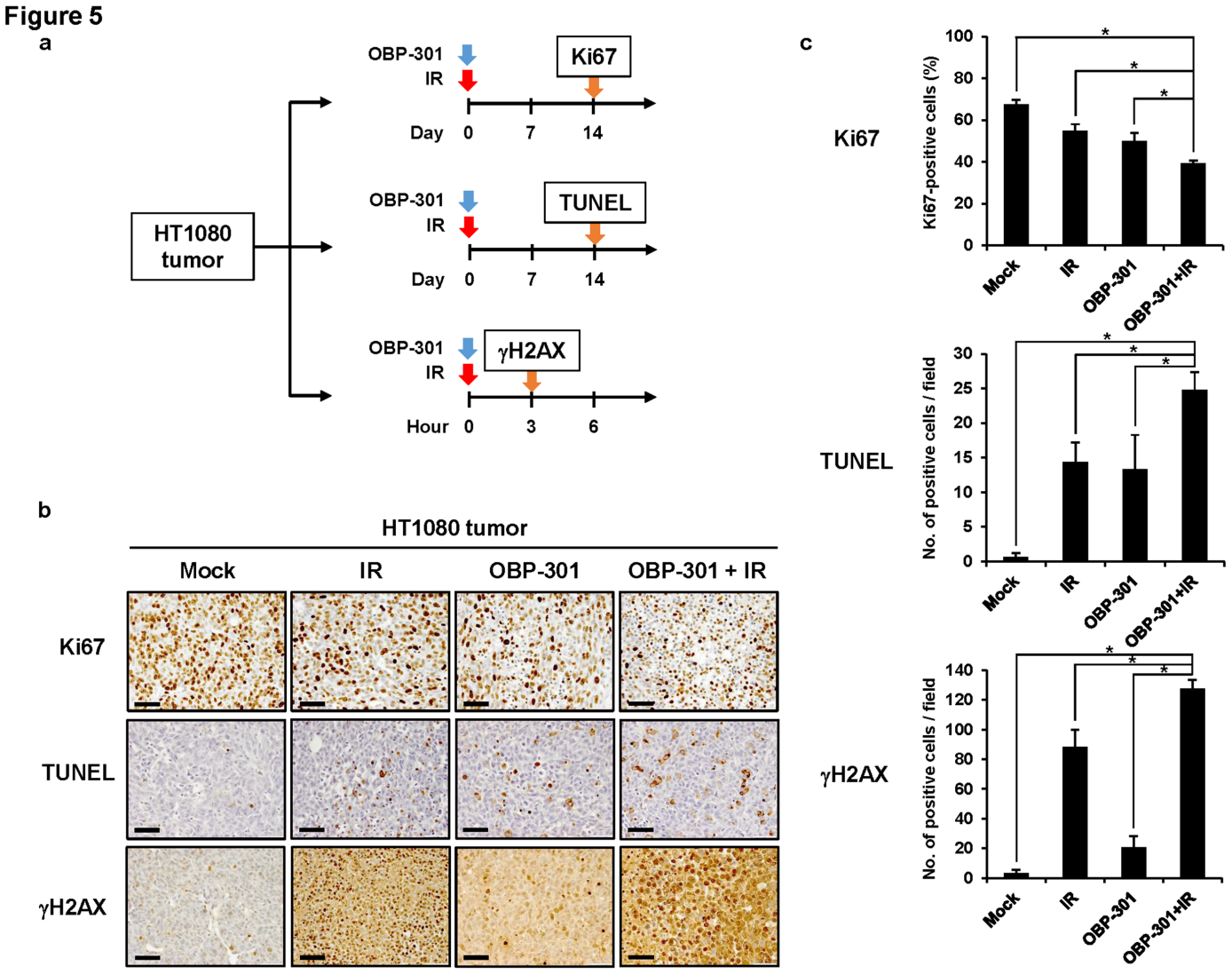

Figure 5

Suppression of proliferation and induction of apoptosis and DNA damage in subcutaneous HT1080 xenograft tumors treated with OBP-301 and ionizing radiation. a. Scheme of treatment protocol used in conjunction with Ki67, TUNEL, and γH2AX assays. HT1080 cells (3 × 106 cells/mouse) were subcutaneously inoculated into the right flanks of mice. Tumor-bearing mice were irradiated at 3 Gy after treatment with an intratumoral injection of OBP-301 (1 × 108 PFU/tumor). b. HT1080 subcutaneous tumor sections were immunostained for Ki67, TUNEL, and γH2AX. Scale bar, 50 μm. c. The number of positive cells for Ki67, TUNEL, and γH2AX. Data are expressed as mean ± SD (n = 3 or 4 in each group; *, $P < 0.05$).

Figure 6

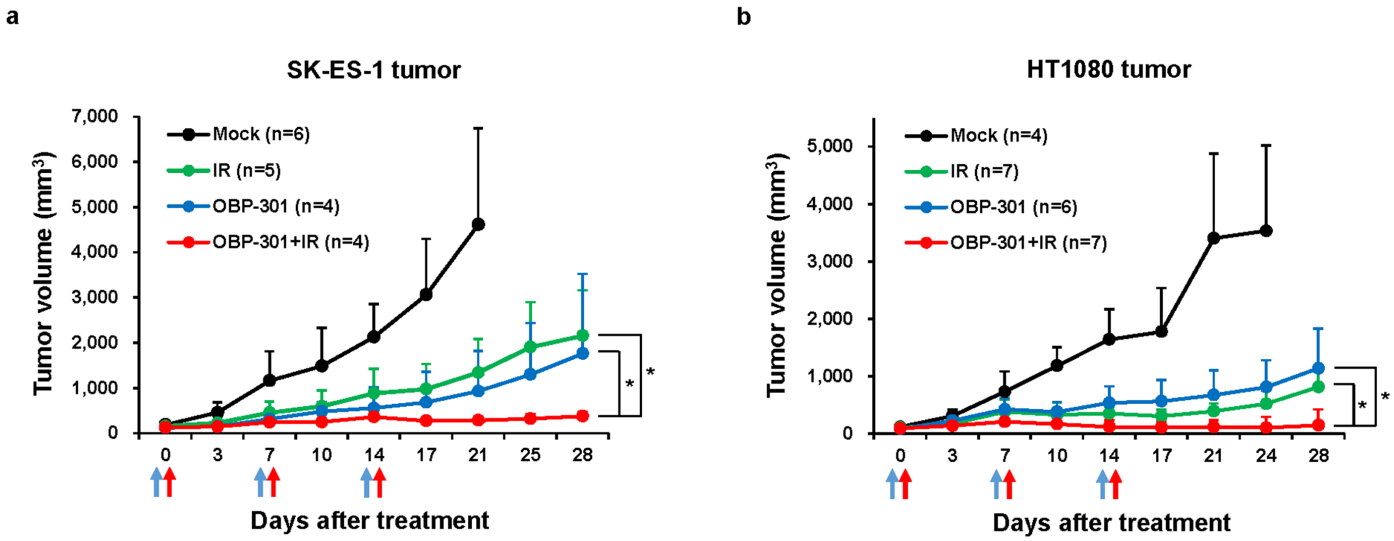

Figure 6

In vivo antitumor effect of combination therapy with OBP-301 and ionizing radiation in the radiosensitive SK-ES-1 and radioresistant HT1080 xenograft tumor models. a, b. SK-ES-1 cells (5 × 106 cells/mouse) or HT1080 cells (3 × 106 cells/mouse) were subcutaneously inoculated into the right flanks of mice. When tumors reached 5 to 7 mm in diameter, tumor-bearing mice were irradiated at 1 Gy (SK-ES-1) or 3 Gy (HT1080) after treatment with an intratumoral injection of OBP-301 (1 × 108 PFU/tumor) for three cycles every week (arrows indicate each treatment administration). The mock treatment group was sacrificed on days 21 and 24 in the SK-ES-1 and HT1080 tumor models, respectively, when tumor volumes reached approximately 4,000 mm3. Tumor growth is expressed as mean tumor volume ± SD (n = 4 to 7 in each group; *, P < 0.05).

Supplementary Files

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