

**Research Paper** 



## Comprehensive investigation of the clinical significance of long non-coding RNA HOXA-AS2 in acute myeloid leukemia using genome-wide RNA sequencing dataset

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Received: 2020.05.11; Accepted: 2020.10.09; Published: 2021.02.21

#### Abstract

**Objective:** The present study aimed to determine the prognostic value of HOXA cluster antisense RNA2 (HOXA-AS2) in acute myeloid leukemia (AML), and to explore its potential molecular mechanisms. We also screening of potential drugs targeting HOXA-AS2 in AML.

**Methods:** The level 3 raw genome-wide RNA sequencing dataset of AML was download from The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) Data Portal, and the potential molecular mechanisms and drugs prediction of HOXA-AS2 in AML were explored using multiple bioinformatics analysis approaches.

**Results:** TCGA AML cohort dataset indicated that HOXA-AS2 was significantly up-regulated in AML bone marrow tissues, and high HOXA-AS2 expression was related to poor overall survival (log-rank *P*=0.0284, hazard ratio 1.640, 95% confidence interval 1.046-2.573). Functional enrichment of differentially expressed genes (DEGs) suggested that the difference in prognosis between AML patients with high- and low-HOXA-AS2 expression may be due to differences in biological processes and pathways, including cell adhesion, angiogenesis, mitogen-activated protein kinase, cell differentiation, and other biological processes, and phosphatidylinositol 3 kinase-protein kinase B and Wnt signaling pathways. We also screened out three potential HOXA-AS2-targeted therapeutic drugs for AML, megestrol, carmustine, and cefoxitin, based on these DEGs. Functional enrichment analysis of HOXA-AS2-co-expressed genes revealed that HOXA-AS2 may act a part in AML by regulating nuclear factor-KB transcription factor activity, DNA methylation, angiogenesis, apoptosis, cell migration, Toll-like receptor 4, and Wnt signaling pathways.

**Conclusion:** Our findings suggest that HOXA-AS2 is up-regulated in the bone marrow in patients with AML, and may serve as a novel prognostic biomarker for AML.

Key words: HOXA-AS2, acute myeloid leukemia, The Cancer Genome Atlas, molecular mechanism, drug prediction

### Introduction

Acute myeloid leukemia (AML) is a clonal malignant disease of the hematopoietic system [1, 2]. The etiology of AML is closely related to genetic factors, and genetic variation plays an important role in its diagnosis, classification, risk prediction, precision treatment, and prognosis prediction [3-5]. The recent application of immunology, cytogenetics, molecular biology, and other technologies, has led to a deeper understanding of the biological characteristics of tumor cells in AML, which has in turn laid the foundations for the accurate classification, diagnosis, and prognostic prediction in AML, as well as for the selection of optimal treatment methods [6, 7].

Long non-coding RNAs (lncRNAs) play an important role in many biological activities, such as dose-compensation, epigenetic regulation, cell cycle regulation, and cell differentiation regulation, and are also associated with many diseases, including cancers and AML. LncRNA mainly functions via its secondary structure and binds to proteins, resulting in chromatin remodeling and affecting transcription factor function. In addition, IncRNAs can also bind to microRNAs, indirectly affecting mRNA expression, or can bind directly to mRNAs, affecting mRNA translation, shearing, and degradation processes. Numerous studies have shown that the lncRNA HOXA-AS2 plays an oncogenic role in a variety of cancers [8]. Dong and his coworkers demonstrated that HOXA-AS2 played a indispensable role in the resistance of AML cells to adriamycin and could thus be a potential target for adriamycin resistance in AML patients [9]. The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) is an open access database containing a large number of tumor multi-omics high-throughput sequencing datasets, including AML [10]. The aim of the present study is to identify the prognostic value of HOXA-AS2 in AML, and to explore its potential molecular mechanisms using a TCGA genome-wide RNA sequencing dataset. We also aimed to screening of potential HOXA-AS2-targeted drugs in AML.

## Materials and methods

### Data acquisition

The level 3 raw RNA sequencing (RNA-seq) dataset of AML bone marrow tissues and the clinical prognostic parameters for 151 patients with AML were got from TCGA (https://portal.gdc.cancer. gov/) [11], including mRNA and lncRNA expression datasets. *EdgeR* was used to normalized the RNA-seq dataset [12]. After matching the RNA-seq data with the clinical prognostic parameters, 130 AML patients with both RNA-seq dataset and clinical prognostic parameters were finally included for subsequent analysis. Of these, 21 AML patients were excluded, including 10 with a survival time of 0, and 11 patients with no survival information.

# Expression distribution and prognostic value of HOXA-AS2 expression in AML

Box plots of HOXA-AS2 expression between bone marrow tissues of AML patients and healthy subjects were derived from the Gene Expression Profiling Interactive Analysis (GEPIA) website (http://gepia.cancer-pku.cn/index.html), based on the TCGA dataset and the GTEx (http://www. gtexportal.org/home/) projects [13]. Patients were divided into high- and low-HOXA-AS2-expression groups by the median expression value, and overall survival (OS) was compared between the two groups. The accuracy of HOXA-AS2 for predicting OS in patients with AML was evaluated using a timedependent receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve, and drawn by the *survivalROC* package (https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/survivalR OC/index.html) using the R platform [14, 15].

# Molecular mechanisms and drug prediction of HOXA-AS2 in AML

We further explored the molecular mechanisms underlying the prognostic differences between AML patients with different HOXA-AS2 expression levels by screening differentially expressed genes (DEGs) using the *edgeR* package. Genes that met the following criteria were considered to be DEGs: |log2 fold change (FC) |>1, P value <0.05, and false discovery rate (FDR) value <0.05. These DEGs were then subjected to functional enrichment analysis using the Database for Annotation, Visualization, and Integrated Discovery v6.8 (DAVID v6.8, https://david.ncifcrf.gov/tools.jsp) [16, 17], Biological Networks Gene Ontology tool (BiNGO) [18], and Gene Set Enrichment Analysis (GSEA) [19]. We also examined the gene co-expression interactions of these DEGs in bone marrow tissues of AML patients using the Weighted Gene Co-Expression Network Analysis (WGCNA) method, as described previously [20]. The meaning of degree in the network is connectivity. The protein-protein interaction (PPI) and gene-gene interaction (GGI) networks of these DEGs were also verified using The Search Tool for the Retrieval of Interacting Genes/Proteins (STRING) (http://string.embl.de/) [21-23] database and GeneMANIA (http://genemania.org/) [24, 25], respectively. We further screened potential drugs for AML patients with high HOXA-AS2 expression by Connectivity Map (CMap, https://portals. broadinstitute.org/cmap/) analysis of these DEGs [26, 27]. Drugs with a mean connectivity score <-0.2 and a P value <0.05 were considered as potential targeted therapeutic drugs for AML patients with high HOXA-AS2 expression. We also performed a survival analysis of these DEGs.

### Functional enrichment of HOXA-AS2 in AML

**LncRNAs** act by regulating related protein-coding genes. Screening genes co-expressed with HOXA-AS2 in AML bone marrow tissues by enrichment analysis will thus help us to understand the molecular mechanism of HOXA-AS2 in AML. We therefore screened protein-coding genes (PCGs) co-expressed with HOXA-AS2 in the whole genome RNA-seq dataset using the cor function through the R platform. PCGs significantly correlated with the HOXA-AS2 expression (Pearson coefficient P value <0.05) were considered to be co-expressed with HOXA-AS2 in AML bone marrow tissue [28, 29]. Functional enrichment analysis of the co-expressed PCGs was performed using DAVID v6.8 and BiNGO, and PPI and GGI networks were constructed using STRING and GeneMANIA, respectively. We also performed a survival analysis of these co-expressed PCGs.

#### Statistical analysis

FDR in *edgeR* and GSEA were carried out according to the Benjamini–Hochberg approach [30-32]. The Kaplan–Meier curves of genes in AML were calculated using the log-rank test, in addition, survival package were used for hazard ratios (HRs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) calculation in the R platform. A *P* value <0.05 was considered significant. SPSS version 20.0 (IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA) and R 3.5.0 (https://www.r-project.org/) were used for all statistical analyses.

### Results

## Expression distribution and prognostic value of HOXA-AS2 expression in AML

We obtained box plots of HOXA-AS2 expression in bone marrow tissues of AML patients and healthy

subjects using the GEPIA website, and showed that expression levels were significantly up-regulated in AML patients (**Figure 1A**). Survival analysis demonstrated that high expression of HOXA-AS2 was notably related to poorer OS in patients with AML (log-rank *P*=0.0284, HR=1.640, 95%CI=1.046-2.573) (**Figure 1B, 1C**). Time-dependent ROC curve analysis confirmed that HOXA-AS2 expression showed a high accuracy for predicting AML 5-year survival, with an area under the curve of 0.729 (**Figure 1D**).

## Molecular mechanisms of HOXA-AS2 and drug prediction in AML

We screened DEGs in a whole-genome RNA-seq dataset of bone marrow tissues from AML patients with different HOXA-AS2 expression levels using the *edgeR* package. There were 1,314 genes were considered as DEGs, including 659 down-regulated and 655 up-regulated genes (**Table S1**). A heat map of the DEGs was shown in **Figure S1**, as well as the volcano plot was shown in **Figure 2**. We subjected these DEGs to functional enrichment analysis to explore the potential mechanisms responsible for the prognostic difference between AML patients with



**Figure 1.** Clinical significance of HOXA-AS2 expression in AML. (A) Box plot of HOXA-AS2 expression distribution in bone marrow tissues of AML patients and healthy subjects (\* P < 0.05). (B) Distribution map of survival time and expression of HOXA-AS2 in AML patients. (C) Kaplan-Meier curve of HOXA-AS2 in the TCGA AML cohort. (D) Time-dependent ROC curve of HOXA-AS2 expression for predicting OS in patients with AML.

low- and high-HOXA-AS2-expression levels. Gene ontology (GO) term analysis performed by DAVID v6.8 indicated that these DEGs were prominently related to cell adhesion, cell-cell signaling, cell migration involved in sprouting angiogenesis, single organismal cell-cell adhesion, positive regulation of mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) activity, cell differentiation, positive regulation of extracellular regulated protein kinase (ERK) 1 and ERK2 cascade, pathway, integrin-mediated signaling positive regulation of MAPK cascade, cytokine receptor activity, and the epoxygenase P450 pathway (Table S2). Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes (KEGG) enrichment analysis suggested that these DEGs were prominently related to extracellular (ECM)-receptor matrix interactions, phosphatidylinositol 3 kinase (PI3K)-protein kinase B (PKB/Akt) signaling pathway, focal adhesion, pathways in cancer, cell-adhesion molecules (CAMs), cytokine-cytokine receptor interactions, calcium, cyclic adenosine monophosphate (cAMP), and Wnt signaling pathways (Table S3). BiNGO enrichment analysis also suggested that these DEGs were prominently related to cell differentiation, cell adhesion, cell migration, angiogenesis, cell proliferation, regulation of the Notch signaling pathway, regulation of the cAMP biosynthetic process, regulation of cell growth, the integrinmediated signaling pathway, positive regulation of cell division, and tumor necrosis factor receptor activity (Figure S2, Table S4).



Figure 2. Volcano plot of DEGs in low- and high-HOXA-AS2-expressing AML patients.

We also investigated the potential mechanisms responsible for the prognostic difference between low- and high-HOXA-AS2-expressing groups using the GSEA approach. GSEA analysis using the c5 (c5.all.v6.2.symbols.gmt) gene set revealed that definitive hemopoiesis biological processes may be involved in the prognostic difference between these two groups (**Figure 3**). In contrast, GSEA analysis using the c2 (c2.all.v6.2.symbols.gmt) gene set revealed gene signatures related to up-regulated in pediatric AML with mutated NPM1, AML with internal tandem duplications (IDT) in fms-related tyrosine kinase 3 (FLT3), targets of nucleoporin 98 (NUP98)-homeobox A9 (HOXA9) fusion, AML cluster, erythroid differentiation, and response to oxidized phospholipids (**Figure 4A-L**). All the above pathways enriched by GSEA were related to AML.



Figure 3. GSEA results in low- and high-HOXA-AS2-expressing AML patients using the c5 (c5.all.v6.2.symbols.gmt) reference gene set.

We further investigated the interactions among these DEGs using the WGCNA, STRING, and GeneMANIA approaches to construct interaction regulatory networks (Figures 5, 6, and 7, respectively). The soft threshold distribution plot and module clustering plot of WGCNA analysis are shown in Figure S3A-D. The highest degree DEGs in the WGCNA network were PCDH17 and RNF182, with a degree of 55. These analyses demonstrated that these DEG had complex co-expression interaction relationships. We also performed a CMap analysis to predict potential HOXA-AS2-targeted therapeutics for AML. Using CMap analysis, we screened three small-molecule drugs, megestrol, carmustine, and cefoxitin, which could be used as targeted therapy for HOXA-AS2 in AML. PubChem (https://pubchem. ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/) provides the chemical structures of these targeted drugs [33, 34] (Figure 8A-C) and the detailed results of the CMap analysis are summarized in Figure 8D. We then used the online search tool for

interactions of chemicals (STITCH; http://stitch. embl.de) [35, 36] to construct drug-protein interaction networks for these three drugs (Figure 9). By matching the drug-related genes and DEGs, four DEGs appeared in these three drug regulatory networks. We therefore concluded that carmustine may play a role in AML patients with high HOXA-AS2 expression levels by regulating these four DEGs: glial cell derived neurotrophic factor (GDNF), catalase (CAT), nitric oxide synthase 2 (NOS2), and dickkopf WNT signaling pathway inhibitor 1 (DKK1). By analyzing the connectivities of these four genes in the WGCNA network, we found that the DKK1 gene had a high degree of 50 in the WGCNA network, with high connectivity and regulation ability. However, the remaining three genes had lower degrees in the network, suggesting that carmustine was likely to exert its therapeutic effect in AML mainly by regulating DKK1.

We also carried out a survival analysis to determine the prognostic values of these DEGs. There were 324 DEGs were prominently related to OS of AML in the present study (Table S5). The top ten significantly prognostic DEGs were as follows (Figure 10A-J): phosphodiesterase 3B (PDE3B), synaptotagmin-like 4 (SYTL4), dendrocyte-expressed seven transmembrane protein (DCSTAMP), Rho guanine nucleotide exchange factor 35 (ARHGEF35), methyltransferase-like 7B (METTL7B), thyrotropinreleasing hormone (TRH), UL16-binding protein 3 (ULBP3), ATPase phospholipid-transporting 10B (ATP10B), 5-hydroxytryptamine receptor 7 (HTR7), and dedicator of cytokinesis 1 (DOCK1).

### Functional enrichment of HOXA-AS2 in AML

Analysis of the PCGs co-expressed with HOXA-AS2 may reflect its function in AML. We detected 903 PCGs co-expressed with HOXA-AS2 in AML bone marrow tissues using the Pearson correlation coefficient for genome-wide co-expression analysis, of which 621 were positively correlated PCGs, while 282 were negatively correlated PCGs (Figure 11). All the co-expressed PCGs were significantly associated with HOXA-AS2, with a Pearson correlation coefficient |r| > 0.3 and P < 0.05 (Table S6). GO term annotation suggested that these co-expressed PCGs participated in the following biological processes: peroxisome, definitive hemopoiesis, positive regulation of nuclear factor (NF)-KB transcription factor activity, DNA methylation, angiogenesis, intrinsic apoptotic signaling pathway in response to oxidative stress, intracellular signal transduction, Toll-like receptor 4 signaling pathway, and cell migration (Table S7). KEGG annotation suggested that these co-expressed PCGs were involved to the peroxisome, Wnt signaling

pathway, and pathways in cancer (Table S8). BINGO enrichment analysis of these HOXA-AS2-coexpressed PCGs produced no meaningful results. Furthermore, because of the strict set parameters for WGCNA, we were unable to use the HOXA-AS2-coexpressed PCGs to construct a highly connected WGCNA regulatory network. However, we constructed a co-expression regulatory network of these HOXA-AS2-co-expressed PCGs using the STRING and GeneMANIA online tools, which demonstrated the complex interactions between these PCGs. The regulatory networks are shown in Figures 12 and 13. Survival analysis of these HOXA-AS2-coexpressed PCGs identified 282 genes that were prominently related to OS in AML patients. The top ten significantly prognostic HOXA-AS2-co-expressed PCGs were as follows: PDE3B, spermatogenesisassociated 9 (SPATA9), serine and arginine rich splicing factor 12 (SRSF12), Ras and Rab interactorlike (RINL), ARHGEF35, centrosomal protein 170 (CEP170), METTL7B, triggering receptor expressed on myeloid cells-like 2 (TREML2), ULBP3, and cyclin D2 (CCND2) (Figure 14A-J, Table S9). Four of the top ten significantly prognostic HOXA-AS2-co-expressed PCGs overlapped with the top ten significantly prognostic DEGs: PDE3B, ARHGEF35, METTL7B, and ULBP3.

## Discussion

Numerous studies have shown that HOXA-AS2 plays an essential role in cancers and other non-cancer diseases [8, 37]. HOXA-AS2 has demonstrated an oncogenic role in a variety of cancers, including pancreatic cancer [38], gastric cancer [39], breast cancer [40], bladder cancer [41], glioma [42], papillary thyroid cancer [43, 44], osteosarcoma [45], non-small lung cancer [46], gallbladder carcinoma [47], colorectal cancer [48, 49], and hepatocellular carcinoma [50, 51]. Knockdown of HOXA-AS2 in the above cancer cell lines significantly inhibited tumor cell proliferation, migration, and invasion, and induced cell cycle arrest and apoptosis [38-51], while overexpression HOXA-AS2 promoted cell proliferation in gallbladder carcinoma [47] and osteosarcoma [45]. Previous studies also found that HOXA-AS2 was significantly up-regulated in multiple tumor tissues, including pancreatic [38], gastric [39], breast [40, 52], and bladder cancer [41], glioma [42], papillary thyroid cancer [43, 44], osteosarcoma [45], non-small lung cancer [46], gallbladder carcinoma [47], colorectal cancer [48, 49, 53], and hepatocellular carcinoma [50, 51]. In our current study, HOXA-AS2 was up-regulated in AML bone marrow tissues by compared with normal bone marrow tissues. Multiple studies have shown that high expression levels of HOXA-AS2 were significantly related to a poor prognosis in patients with gastric cancer [39], breast cancer [40], papillary thyroid cancer [44], non-small lung cancer [46], colorectal cancer [53], and hepatocellular carcinoma [51]. Our results also demonstrated that AML patients with high expression of HOXA-AS2 had shorter OS, consistent with the results of previous studies.



Figure 4. GSEA results in low- and high-HOXA-AS2-expressing AML patients using the c2 (c2.all.v6.2.symbols.gmt) reference gene set (A-L).

N4 DKK1	ADAMDECT	FZD8 SL	C9C2 SLC	25A48 SRF	X2 ATP	IB4 SH3G	L3 COL20A	I SIX4	NKAIN3	SALL4	DRD5	THEG	PRR32	NR2F2	SULF1	PCDH15	TDRD12	GNAT1	НОХА4	5
D MINDY4B	DYNAP	TEX47 CF	AP46 NL	GN1 ELA	NE	11 RIMS	1L1R2	DLL3	КСМНВ	SPATA8	DPEP3	TP53INP2	SNAP25	CLEC2L	GPR153	PITX1	POU4F1	CCDC144N	LOR14A16	SI
XKR4	DPYSL5	EMX2	BX3 RC	AN2 CDP	(15 1 LG	I3 MECO	GNG12	PRKAG	3 GNG4	C3orf14	ZBED2	PDCL2	CCL24	SLC2A12	ANXA8	SLC2A14	CD163	PRICKLE2	OR14K1	
C9 KCNIP1	PCOLCE2 X		RIN2B AC11	3554 284GA	LNTA GAB	RG1 PHF2	1B SLC17A	2 RELN	LRRC15	BIGALT	ITGBL1	TLX1	FBXO27	COL21A1	EFNB3	VIT	OLFM3	GPR158	MST1	
3 USP44	SOX1	нохая		XB5 FAM	I9A5 TG	M7 NPY	R CACNG	8 SHANK	2 NTNG1	MUC16	SBK2	KCNJ8	MLXIPL	MPO	KLRF2	ADGRL4	COL4A1	<b>B4GALNT</b>	RTP5	N
2 HCN1	NNMT	KCNT2 CO	LISAT ED	IL3 TEX	(14 FOX	F1 ONEC	UT2 SLC13A	3 APLN	TNK1	FOLR2	RAG1	DOK5	ONAJC50	EYA1	GPC3	ANXA8L1	SLC 10A2	HOXB4	LBX1	
PRRT4	MMP1 L	GALS12	SJB2 EP	HA3 EPH	A6 LG	R6 CHR	CDH11	NOST	FAM1634	RNF17	UGT2B7	CT45A5	PTN	SCN5A	ARHGAP4	4 COL6A5	OLAH	ASXL3	OR1C1	1¢
1 BBOX1	CT45A10	NRG3 D	AAM2 AC	ANC	S1 GAB	RA2 AGA	P9 AVP	PTGIS	SYCE1	IL5RA	FAM84A	KRT17	IL411	ATP2B2	PRELP	VWA2	HOXA13	DUSP26	1-Dec	Yc
TBX4	GABRE D	NAJC5B CF	AP221 KI	K7 LG	MN CD	96 CTA	CERCAN	M TACSTD	2 LAMA4	RUNX1T	PDPN	KCNK1	HMSD	BARX2	TM4SF18	SLC22A31	GDA	CNTER	HPSE2	
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HLF	CRHR2	IQCA1 H	OXB2 PO	F1B PTC	HD4 CE	S1 OGD	HL PTCHD:	3 TNFRSF	18 FGF6	MAGEA2	PQLC2L	CD24	TIMD4	LRAT	SLC13A5	WIPF3	LY6K	NEUROG	ZFPM2	
GLDN	SPAG17	BGN	/SIR WS	CD2 FAM	35B CACN	A2D1 DAB	1 IL33	HRC	SYT4	MXRA5	FAM198A	HOXA7	ABCC9	HMX2	KCNF1	PCDH10	M47E-STE	0 POUIF1	ECEL1	
MLP	CFHR3	IR2DL4	IAGI1 MD	GA2 BL	D ADG	RB3 RFPL	4A PAPPA	PADI3	CAPN13	SLC30A8	PROZ	THSD4	RTL1	TEKT2	SCN3A	ROBO1	LCN6	HOXA3	EDN3	an.
POPDC3	KLRG2	SOX11 TMP	RSS11F HO	KC10 ASP	PG SRG	AP1 BOD1	L2 ALPP	TMEM23	3 FBN3	PRKAA2	FERMT2	CACNA2D	2 TDRD9	IGDCC4	ZNF804B	SERPINB2	STK32A	CAV1	SEMA6B	
1 FUT6	NR0B1		GB7 SLO	C51B LM	D1 BVE	S HLA-D	DA1 PREX2	THY1	LPO	ABLIM3	FAM69C	PDE2A	SNAP91	BDKRB2	TNFSF1	RYR2	PCSK2	ТРО	CHAT	
A1 FAM71A	CADM3 FA	M160A1AC0	20636.2 CAC	NA1B MRG	PRF RNF	182 MNX	BTNL9	AC092042	2.3 PCDH17	BRINP2	PKP1	FBLN5	FUT1	LDLRAD3	SHOX2	DMKN	SPANXB1	RND3	KCNN2	
6 FGR	SPIC	CD5L R	NF150 EP	HA7 ORS	A4 SH2	04B GRIP	2 COL6A3	3 CST7	APOE	NCR2	KCNJ15	LCN10	TAAR1	BCL2L14	HEPH	AC091980	CLEC5A	EPS8L3	HS6ST3	
FOXC2	C8orf22	CTSD GA	LNT13 NM	UR1 FOX	(A3) IGFE	BP2 FAM4	7E ART3	FAM3B	Clorf141	LTK	NAP1L3	LEP	HOXB3	ADAMTS	NPHS2	KRT5	T	<b>RPS6KA6</b>	NLGN4X	
KDR	MME	HOXA6 C	1orf87	C6 FAM1	10C NO	SLC26	MEIS3	ERAS	SLCO2B	FIGN	KIAA1644	RHOXF2E	PRR36	PDYN	NMU	SIX1	PRPH	HOXB6	ZNF423	
HGF	GRK1	FTO	PRL FC	RL4 1 IL 17	RE CYP4	F11 RHC	J SDC2	RASSF	C5orf38	VSX1	SLC38A4	RASL12	E GABRA1	OVCH2	ALPPL2	EDNRA	TLL1	SLIT3	CLCNKA	P
ADRA1D	PCDHB6	FREM2 C		1210 FGF	13 COL	1A2 CDH	7 ONECUT		- Connector	the set	19			Care S	-	100	CNTNAPS	CYP2C18	MGAT4C	
	Up-r	egulat	ion D	EGs		Do	wn-reg	gulatio	on DE	Gs		- Weig	ghted	gene	со-е	press	sion i	nterac	tion	

Figure 5. WGCNA regulatory network of DEGs.

SCAND EMILINE PEPUL ANKEED UNCSA GCOUTS PAX2 COL	LAAT KIFTA SYNT CX3CRT COLSAG CTSV LOXL4 MY	TTL NKD1 SLCAA CONO GPR110 FAM171A1 C2CD4C RAG1 1	NERSETTA CAPRITA CAPRITA COLLAG. 20140-10 REPORT FORRE HOXES PTORE CTOORS CACHO
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MEST EDNRA NAPILS OLIG2 TMPRSS11F HINFIG CT45A	TO PITAT URPIE AND TEADA RHOATES AP	UN NTNG2 THTCL ELTD1 KUHL13 AGAP10 PENK EOF18	PKP2 IGFBP5 ME1 GABRIO CD200R1L CACNA2D1 TECP23 EPHAD KCNO2 PTCH1 DCLK1
TONS MARVED2 TSPAN7 SLPI CLEC4D IGFBP4 GSX1	CA PANI106 GRMA DUSP21 POF16 CDH2 ST8SIA5 GP	CAN REVIN UGT287 (PEX3) SEC34A2 ONECUTS SERTION GLISS A	RHGAR4 AZGP1 GABRO SPSB4 AFF2 RBFOXO KURF2 TCF23 DRAMO ECELO PCBP3
CEATT SOST KIF26A GRASP TILL LAMBA TESSINP2 AP	UNR CACNAIC SOXI RRAD FOXOI COK20 VSXI GN	ATA COSL ABLING SYCPI ELAVLA MAPILOGA FOFIO PRR7	NR5A2 ITPKA DEFAL EPCAM SERPINGI PSD3 CD177 CORO2B CT0172 BTNL9 CLECSA
ZP2 ATP13A4 GLI3 SPERT TYTHIA MAOB FLTA HO	X82 SYCE1 PRSS3P2 HS85T3 CCL8 8BOXT ARHGEP35 POU	J4F1 HOXBB MAGII AGR2 PTPRG SLC17A2 FGD6 ELANE	PROZ FAMI89A1 CHRM2 RUNKITI POPDC3 KCNS3 NUDTI KAA1211L PLEXHAG CCDCT36 NOB
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Up-regulation DEGs	Down-regulation DEGs	Co-expression relationship	Experimentally determined relationship
Figure 6. Regulatory network of DEGs	s constructed using the STRING onlir	ne tool.	

Regarding its molecular mechanism in cancers, HOXA-AS2 promoted proliferation and induced epithelial-mesenchymal transition (EMT) via the miR-520c-3p/glypican-3 axis in hepatocellular carcinoma [50], the miR-520c-3p/S100 calciumbinding protein A4 (S100A4) axis in papillary thyroid cancer [43], and the miR-520c-3p/transforming growth factor beta receptor 2/RELA (RELA protooncogene, NF- $\kappa$ B subunit) axis in breast cancer[40]. Dong et al. also demonstrated that the HOXA-AS2/ miR-520c-3p/S100A4 axis participated in the regulation of adriamycin resistance in AML, and that HOXA-AS2 expression was enhanced in bone marrow tissues of AML patients after treatment with adriamycin-based chemotherapy [9]. In addition, HOXA-AS2-induction of EMT through miR-520c-3p was also observed in osteosarcoma [45]. HOXA-AS2 also mediated the EMT pathway for oncogene function in colorectal cancer [48] and gallbladder carcinoma [47]. Regarding other important molecular mechanisms, HOXA-AS2 promoted cell proliferation through the HOXA-AS2/enhancer of zeste homolog 2 (EZH2)/cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor 1A (also known as P21), polo-like kinase 3, DNA damageinducible transcript 3 axis in gastric cancer [39], the HOXA-AS2/EZH2/lysine-specific demethylase 1 (LSD1) in pancreatic cancer [38], and the HOXA-AS2/ EZH2 and LSD1/P21 and Kruppel-like factor 2 axis in colorectal cancer [49]. Gao et al. suggested that HOXA-AS2 achieved its oncogenic function and angiogenesis in gliomas via the miR-373/epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR)/VE-cadherin, matrix metallopeptidase 2 (MMP2) and MMP9/PI3K-Akt signaling pathway axis [42]. Furthermore, Wang et al. demonstrated that HOXA-AS2 regulated the function of oncogenes in bladder cancer by regulating the HOXA-AS2/miR-125b/SMAD family member 2 axis, and was involved in the regulation of migration, invasion, and stemness of bladder cancer cells. HOXA-AS2 regulated the HOXA-AS2/miR-520a-3p/ homeobox D8 and mitogen-activated protein kinase kinase kinase 2 axis in non-small lung cancer [46], and

the miR-15a-5p/homeobox A3 (HOXA3) axis in papillary thyroid cancer [44]. Zhao et al. reported that HOXA-AS2 regulated the HOXA3/EGFR/Ras/Raf/ MAPK kinase/ERK pathway to reduce the sensitivity of glucocorticoids in acute lymphoblastic leukemia [54]. In the present study, we performed enrichment analyses of DEGs in AML patients with different expression levels of HOXA-AS2, which also demonstrated that HOXA-AS2 plays an essential role in AML via the PI3K-Akt, ERK, and MAPK pathways regulation, as well as by affecting cell adhesion, cell differentiation, cell migration, angiogenesis, and cell proliferation biological processes. These results are consistent with previous studies. In addition, we also found that the DEGs were enriched in the Wnt, Notch, cell-adhesion molecules, and integrin-mediated signaling pathways, which represent previously unreported associations with HOXA-AS2 regulatory mechanisms. The HOXA-AS2-co-expressed PCGs identified in the present study were enriched in the NF-kB signaling pathway. Relationship between HOXA-AS2 and NF-KB has been reported previously. Zhu et al. reported that HOXA-AS2 was take part in osteogenesis via regulating NF-kB pathway in mesenchymal stem cells [55], and another study found that HOXA-AS2 was involved in inhibiting endothelial inflammation by regulating the NF-KB pathway [37].



Figure 7. Regulatory network of DEGs constructed using the GeneMANIA online tool.



Figure 8. Results of CMap analysis. Chemical structures of (A) megestrol, (B) carmustine, and (C) cefoxitin. (D) Summary of CMap analysis results.



Figure 9. Drug-protein interaction networks constructed using the STITCH online tool.



Figure 10. Kaplan-Meier curves of the top ten significantly prognostic DEGs. (A) PDE3B, (B) SYTL4, (C) DCSTAMP, (D) ARHGEF35, (E) METTL7B, (F) TRH, (G) ULBP3, (H) ATP10B, (I) HTR7, and (J) DOCK1 in AML OS.



Figure 11. Co-expression of regulatory networks of HOXA-AS2 in AML bone marrow tissues.



Of these three HOXA-AS2-targeted drugs used in AML, carmustine is a broad-spectrum anticancer drug with good curative effect in patients with Hodgkin's disease [56] and AML [57, 58], as well as some curative effect in patients with breast cancer [59], lung cancer [60], brain cancer [61, 62] and brain metastasis [63, 64]. Carmustine can be used to treat elderly or comorbid patients with AML, as well as post-transplant acute leukemia in patients with non-Hodgkin's and Hodgkin's lymphoma [57, 58]. As is well-known, no studies have revealed the use of cefoxitin for the treatment of AML, but cefoxitin was used to treat colon tumorigenesis induced by the human commensal enterotoxigenic *Bacteroides fragilis* in mice [65]. Megestrol acetate can be used to treat advanced endometrial cancer [66], and has also demonstrated an effect in advanced renal cell carcinoma [67-69], and was shown to improve the appetite in patients with advanced cancer [70, 71]. However, a review of the literature found no relevant reports of megestrol for AML treatment. Thus, although the present study identified three potential HOXA-AS2-targeted drugs, only carmustine has been reported to show efficacy for the treatment of AML.



Figure 14. Kaplan-Meier curves of the top ten significantly HOXA-AS2-co-expressed PCGs. (A) PDE3B, (B) SPATA9, (C) SRSF12, (D) RINL, (E) ARHGEF35, (F) CEP170, (G) METTL7B, (H) TREML2, (I) ULBP3, and (J) CCND2 in AML OS.

This study had some limitations. This was a single-cohort study based on the TCGA dataset, and additional independent cohorts are required to verify our results. Second, although we performed functional enrichment analyses to investigate the potential molecular mechanisms of HOXA-AS2 in AML using multiple bioinformatics tools, in vivo and in vitro experiments are needed to confirm these findings. Third, the small-molecule HOXA-AS2targeted drugs screened using the AML whole genome dataset and CMap tool need further experimental verification. Despite these limitations, the present study found that HOXA-AS2 could be a prognostic indicator for AML. In addition, we also used a genome-wide dataset of AML bone marrow tissues to explore the molecular mechanisms of HOXA-AS2 in AML, and screened out three potential small-molecule targeted drugs. These findings thus provide a theoretical basis for further investigations of the functions and mechanisms of HOXA-AS2 in AML.

### Conclusions

Our study provides the first evidence for the use of HOXA-AS2 as a prognostic marker for AML, with high HOXA-AS2 expression related to a poor prognosis in AML patients. Our findings also suggested that HOXA-AS2 levels may be significantly up-regulated in the bone marrow tissues of AML patients compared with healthy subjects. Using multiple bioinformatics analysis tools, we determined the potential molecular mechanisms of HOXA-AS2 in AML, and screened out three small-molecule drugs (megestrol, carmustine, and cefoxitin) as potential HOXA-AS2-targeted therapeutic agents in AML patients. We also identified multiple genes associated with AML prognosis. However, further studies were required to verify these findings.

### **Supplementary Material**

Supplementary figures. http://www.jcancer.org/v12p2151s1.pdf Supplementary tables. http://www.jcancer.org/v12p2151s2.xlsx

### Acknowledgements

This work was supported in part by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (No.81160075); Natural Science Foundation of Guangxi (No.0728124); Self-raised Scientific Research Fund of the Ministry of Health of Guangxi Province (Z2014035). The authors thank the contributors of The Cancer Genome Atlas (https://portal.gdc.cancer.gov/) for their contribution to share the AML dataset on open access. In addition, we also would like to acknowledge the helpful comments on this paper received from our reviewers.

### **Competing Interests**

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

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